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edited by
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Ecclesial Futures

Ecclesial Futures is an international, ecumenical peer-reviewed journal. It publishes high-quality, original research and theological reflection on the development and transformation of local Christian communities and the systems that support them as they join in the mission of God in the world.

We understand local Christian communities broadly to include traditional 'parish' churches and independent local churches, religious communities and congregations, new church plants, so-called 'fresh expressions' of church, 'emergent' churches and 'new monastic' communities.

We hold to an inter-disciplinary approach to theological research and reflection; the core disciplines being theology, missiology and ecclesiology. Other social science and theological disciplines may be helpful in supporting the holistic nature of any research e.g. anthropology and ethnography, sociology, statistical research, biblical studies, leadership studies and adult learning.

The journal fills an important reflective space between the academy and on-the-ground practice within the field of mission studies, ecclesiology and the so-called 'missional church.' The audience for the journal is truly global wherever the local church and the systems that support them exists.

We accept the following types of article: original research papers, narrative or literature reviews on a relevant subject, theological and missiological reflections, case study reports, conference papers and book reviews.

Articles of around 6,000 words are submitted to the co-editors in the first instance and further information on writing for us can be obtained from them.

The journal is published twice a year in June and December.

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Editorial

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Welcome to another issue of *Ecclesial Futures* and another fine set of original research contributions on the development and transformation of local Christian communities.

Original research

This issue of *Ecclesial Futures* offers five original research articles. We start in the particular, in London and among the homeless. During a Covid-19 lockdown, Sally Mann undertook participatory action research over six months, engaging in ethnographic research of homeless people in a nearby park. She analysed her interactions with the homeless, using the work of Paul Ricoeur to thicken her reflexivity and thus inform her practice. In particular, Mann drew on Ricoeur's notion of "emplotment" and the ways in which individuals make sense of their identity, their relationship to others and their place in the world, in the telling of stories. Hence the act of listening and the reflecting back of repeated phrases, shifts in retold stories, offers pathways for changed sense of self. The stories that are shared might not be wholly accurate, but they can be transformative. In working with Ricoeur, Mann offers a fresh and grounded understanding

of "being with". She demonstrates how attending deeply to the stories of the homeless invites those who feel trapped to explore a different identity, as known characters who belong in storied communities. Mann's article is a fine example of how reflection can inform action and guide the development and transformation of local Christian practice.

We move to a second particular context, that of evangelistic activity by Ghanaian migrant communities in the United Kingdom. John Neate identified a significant gap between the stated evangelistic aspiration of the Ghanaian Church of Pentecost-UK (CoP-UK) to "possess the nations" and the practical situation within its individual assemblies. He explored this gap using empirical research, including questionnaires, interviews and focus groups. The research revealed very low levels of participation by White British people in CoP-UK and a paucity of cross-cultural friendships among the Ghanaian church members. Barriers to cross-cultural friendships included the fear of being influenced by different cultural values and concerns over how Ghanaian church members might perceive the building of relationships. Neate also observed a lack of positive feedback about White British culture among his participants. A feature of Neate's research is his desire to not simply achieve an academic goal, but conduct transforming research that might actually shape ecclesial futures, in this case among the Ghanaian Church of Pentecost-UK. Hence Neate sought to model the relational approach he was seeking to explore and observed insights being crystallized among his participants through the research process. Alongside Neate's research and approach, I also commend his bibliography, which gathers an impressive range of resources in understanding migrant missiologies and diaspora movements.

We move from the particularities of culture to the particularity of film. Rein Den Hertog works with the Polish film *Corpus Christi* and the ways in which the main character facilitates communal processes of interpretation and reconciliation. Hertog argues that the *missio Dei* is visualized in a particular social reality. Hertog uses the movie to examine contemporary ecclesial practices in his denomination, the Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland (CGKN). The result is a set of challenges to the nature of gospel witness, ministerial identity and liturgical practice. From film and denominational self-reflection, Hertog then turns backwards and sideways. Looking to the past, Hertog notes several starting points in his Reformed tradition that encourage the ordained minister to understand themselves as a facilitator of processes of interpretation. Looking sideways, Hertog examines Michael Moynagh's understandings of leadership as conversations, group processes and sense-making. The article concludes with three challenges: including ministerial practice,

ministerial formation, and lay participation in local communities. While these challenges are focused on CGKN, they provide thought provoking challenges for all those working toward communal processes of interpretation and reconciliation in ecclesial communities.

Our final two articles research another dimension of particularity in mission, exploring missiological reflection on how the human brain works. Nigel Rooms works with recent research in neuroscience and considers what Iain McGilchrist's interdisciplinary work in *The Master and his Emissary* might offer to the particularity of Christian spirituality. Rooms engages critically with two Christian responses to McGilchrist, one broadly Evangelical, the other Anglican. Rooms argues that the recovery of the apophatic stream of Christian spirituality and the importance of nurturing the gift of "beholding", in which the world as God's creation is a gift to be noticed. The embodied dimensions of this spirituality are traced, including heightened awareness of the here and now and an unselfing. What results are conditions which make possible an openness to the other and around which practices of hospitality, communal discernment and joining in with what God can form. Nigel works to integrate his analysis with his ministry as a spiritual director and mission consultant. His aim is to integrate the individual and communal as the local church participates in the *missio Dei*. (Rooms is co-editor of *Ecclesial Futures* and this team approach to editing means that academic standards of double blind peer review can be maintained, in order that readers can benefit from the original research being conducted by the journal's editors.)

Mike Harrison joins Rooms in an examination of how recent research in neuroscience might inform mission. This article offers a sustained reflection on character formation as participation in the *missio Dei*. The argument is that while behavioural attempts and Aristotelian approaches are popular, both in contemporary organizational practice and contemporary (especially secular) literature, they are theologically problematic. Harrison then makes a constructive turn. First, Harrison turns to developments in neuroscience and the ways in which the brain processes affection. Second, he provides numerous examples to outline the ways in which loving attachment relationship to the divine and accountability-in-community are responses to the loving gaze of the Divine. While there is plenty of scope for further research into the lived realities of communal formation, Harrison provides an original and theologically formed meditation on embodied ecclesial practices.

What is instructive is to realize that, in different ways, all our articles are working at this interface between the individual and the communal in contemporary mission. Mann's individual listening to the homeless results in

transformations in communal belonging. Neate examines how a denomination might nurture cross-cultural friendships through encouraging more relational ways of being that transform the evangelistic sense of self. Hertog demonstrates how cinematic analysis can provides mirrors on what it might mean to shift from individual and clergy-centric identities to communal processes of interpretation. Rooms theorizes how the spiritual practice of beholding can form local communities in discerning what God is up as they participate in the *missio Dei*. Across diverse contexts, these articles provide challenges and evoke possibilities in the development and transformation of local Christian communities. I commend them to your reflecting, thinking and acting.

Partnerships

As a jounal, we continue to be delighted with the unfolding partnership with Radboud University Press and Open Journals. Through Diamond Open Access, original research is available free to authors and reader. The shift of *Ecclesial Futures* from print to online has brought significant increase in access, evident in downloads of abstracts, complete articles and book reviews across all the issues of *Ecclesial Futures* to date, current and archived. We have also been delighted to see people offering to be reviewers through the online platform (https://ecclesialfutures.org/). Their reviewing expertise is already evident in several of the articles in this issue.

Ecclesial Futures partners with Churches Together in England to offer an annual MA prize in Mission. Every year, a group of mission-minded scholars across England read MA level dissertations from students completing their studies at a UK based college or university around the topics of mission, evangelism and church planting with a particular focus on mission in the UK context. In 2022, as a journal we offer our congratulations to Owen May for his MA dissertation *A Theology of Mission for Scriptural Reasoning – Guesthood: The Good Samaritan, The Incarnation, and Mystery*.[1] Owen, who studied at Cranmer Hall in Durham, was delighted to have won, noting, "What is really encouraging is that more people are becoming interested in relationships between those of the Abrahamic faiths and finding ways into deeper understanding and friendship."

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1 Owen May, *A Theology of Mission for Scriptural Reasoning – Guesthood: The Good Samaritan, The Incarnation, and Mystery*, MATM dissertation, Durham University, 2021. https://cte.org.uk/app/uploads/2022/06/A-Theology-of-Mission-for-SR-Owen-May.pdf.

Another partnership important to *Ecclesial Futures* is with the Christian Communities and Mission Study Group of International Association of Mission Studies. We are delighted to have an activity report from the recent IAMS Assembly 2022. Such reports remind us of the global nature of research into the development and transformation of local Christian communities. The report also points to current gaps in the field. These include improvised theorizing of approaches to the "other", the cultural embedded nature of listening, empirical study of partnerships and the possibilities of learnings from other culture. We invite you as researchers to consider ways your work might respond to these current gaps. We also continue as a journal to actively seek submissions of original research from diverse cultures and contexts. We also seek reviews of book from across the breath of the worldwide church.

Thanks

Thanks to each of the blind peer reviewers, who continue to provide constructive, thoughtful and engaged feedback. Thanks to my co-editor Nigel Rooms and to Patrick Todjeras (who remains eager to receive book reviews). Thanks to our copyeditor Christopher Pipe and the team at Radboud University Press and Open Journals for their skill and care.

Finally, stay connected. All our issues including archives are stored at https://ecclesialfutures.org/, thanks to the generosity of Wipf and Stock Publishers, Radboud University Press and Open Journals. To receive updates via the newsletter, sign up at https://ecclesialfutures.org/.

Report of the Christian Communities and Mission Study Group

IAMS Assembly, Morling College, Sydney, Australia 7-11 July 2022

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The Christian Communities and Mission Study Group (CC&M) was conceived at the 2016 International Association of Mission Studies (IAMS) Assembly in Seoul and later accepted as a study group by the IAMS Executive Committee. The meeting in Sydney was our first gathering to share papers. As conveners of the Group and knowing its connection to *Ecclesial Futures* we share this brief report with readers of the journal.

The *Christian Communities and Mission* Study Group understands local Christian communities as (a) the hermeneutic of the gospel and (b) meeting God's future as it comes towards us in the shape of the reign of God within the particular time and place that we find ourselves. This requires these communities

to be constantly adapting and changing as they orient themselves towards God's preferred and promised future in a rapidly changing world. We believe study and research in how local churches change to be increasingly faithful in their everyday apostolicity is urgently needed.

Schedule and Process

CC&M received 40 paper proposals for the (postponed) 2020 Sydney assembly, 33 of which were accepted for this Study Group. Of those 2020 papers, 12 were reconfirmed for 2022 and we had 17 more proposals for 2022 of which 13 were accepted. In the end, due to the usual last-minute changes, there were 21 presentations scheduled and 20 delivered.

IAMS was run as a hybrid conference, both online and onsite at Morling College. The CC&M conveners put a lot of thought into how the benefits of being hybrid could be maximized for our study group, and potential disadvantages minimized. We decided early in 2022 to use a "flipped classroom" approach to sharing the papers and asked each presenter to record a 20-minute video of their material which could be watched beforehand. As conveners we encouraged participants to view, make comments, and provide questions on the videos, and did so ourselves for each presentation. Written papers were also available beforehand.

Interactive learning was an important priority for us, modelling something foundational to this group – the formation of Christian community around God's mission. Thus, we organized the papers into seven different themes and in each session the two or three presenters (from the same theme) offered a short five-minute summary of their paper. Then, rather than discussing each individual paper one by one, we encouraged a community of learning to form, inviting "generous, appreciative, inquiring and probing" comments and questions from those in the room and online on all of the presentations. This enabled commonalities and differences to be explored alongside the learnings from each individual paper. Appreciative feedback overwhelmingly affirmed this approach, and some commented on the different "feel" and culture it gave to our study group.

Participants

Ten countries were represented by those who presented: Australia, Germany, Pakistan, New Zealand, Myanmar, Philippines, South Africa, South Korea, USA and the UK. Of the 21 presenters, five were women: less than one quarter. Nine of the presenters were online and eleven onsite. We deliberately mixed online and onsite presentations in each session to help ensure that the onsite group did not dominate.

Themes

As noted above, we pre-organized the papers into seven themes: chaplaincy; missional/attractional church models (especially in South Korea); responses to Covid-19; community and belonging; war, crisis and justice; indigeneity and decolonization; and partnerships and power.

Learnings

Each paper and collection of papers generated creative and critical discussion and a good deal of learning. Our final session was a debrief, where we considered the common learnings and insights from the papers. These are outlined next.

We recognized that different approaches can be taken to the "other". Some presentations described churches and mission initiatives that had tended to take a deficit approach, identifying problems and seeking to resolve them. Other activities and initiatives described were more appreciative in style, beginning with recognizing the good and working to enhance that. The starting point makes a difference to the overall stance and approach taken.

We noted the importance of deep listening for the church in mission. Such listening is attentive to the complexities of language, including the need to hear people in their own language. While this certainly relates to syntax, it is much deeper than that. Listening also needs to be attentive to cultural difference, because listening is itself culturally bound.

We affirmed the importance of healthy partnerships and interactions between and beyond churches. Mutuality was key here: both mutual partnerships, characterized by humility; and mutual understandings, characterized by respect. The significance and potential of resource sharing was noted, again

with an emphasis on mutuality, rather than a presumption of a "stronger" group giving one-way support to a "weaker" one. While this was noted in relation to interaction between churches, it can also be extended to the sharing of insights and perspectives between the West and the global South. In relation to this, we noted the need for Western Christians to give up or let go of their ethno-centrism, taking a decolonizing stance. We also recognized the importance of "bridge people" who have an ability to cross over from one culture or group to the other and connect the two together. Stories of intentionally working together ought to be shared and celebrated.

We affirmed the learnings from other cultures. Two were particularly noted. First, the contribution that Māori scholar Mason Durie's Te Whare Tapa Whā model can make to our understandings of the interrelatedness of wellbe-ing (Durie 1985). Secondly, *ganjang gejang* and the osmotic pressure between crab meat and soy sauce as an evocative image of kingdom renewal.

We were aware that deep theology lay behind our discussions, and per-haps the limitations of missional ecclesiology in relation to systematic theology. We were aware that not all theological terms were used in the same way by all participants. This invites careful definitions, while recognizing that consensus is not necessarily possible or required. That said, some foundational things remain: for instance recognizing Christ as unifier between us all.

We recognized that effective mission, ministry, and change takes time. We affirmed the power and activity of God in our world and in our lives and wondered how to with live with that power, and how might we use it for good. We affirmed the invitation to move to the margins and our expectancy to meet God there.

Reference

Durie, M. H. 1985. "A Maori Perspective on Health." *Social Science and Medicine* 20.5: 483-6.

Parklife – Listening to Stories as a Deep Missional Practice

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Abstract

This paper offers missiological reflections on a sociological research project the author undertook during the 2020 Covid lockdown, called *Parklife* (Mann, 2021). The fieldwork for this involved listening to the stories of those experiencing homelessness during the pandemic. This paper reflects on this experience and suggests that a deeper understanding of how stories work may serve to strengthen the creative, and potentially transformative, art of missional listening. To this end, it brings findings from the *Parklife* project into a conversation with Ricoeur's notion of the narratological self, interrogating the role that stories have in identity creation. It offers a set of working propositions for consideration in other missional contexts.

Introduction

I am a missional minister in the East End of London and a jobbing sociologist. These roles synchronized in a small-scale research project called *Parklife* that I undertook to explore experiences of homelessness during the pandemic (Mann, 2021). Now, as I reflect on the methods and findings of *Parklife*, I believe there are important implications for missional leadership. Here I suggest how and why inviting people to share their stories is a powerful missional practice, especially among the most marginalized communities.

When we think of stories and mission, perhaps the power of *storytelling* is most readily appreciated. We may even emphasize this side of the dynamic:

> A missional ecclesiology demands a new story. The best response to the challenges in a complex world is to *tell the stories* of the church … In a certain sense, the whole enterprise of Christian theology is about *storytelling* … Leaders are *storytellers*. They know that stories make life possible (Niemandt 2019: 143, emphasis added).

Telling stories is an essential part of forming a missional community (Roxburgh and Romanuk, 2006: 71). Contextualizing and weaving together the cosmic gospel with local stories is an artform (Hirsch and Ferguson, 2011: 1343-4). Missional communities are 'story-rich' and our narratives invite others to join and find their place in a communal story (Morisy, 2004).

But what precisely happens when we invite someone to tell us their story? Does this have its own intrinsic power?

Reflecting on the stories curated in the *Parklife* project convinces me that soliciting and truly attending to stories is a concrete example of what Sam Wells calls 'being with', a practice of 'incarnational mission' (2018). Here, I suggest that a deeper understanding of how stories work may serve to strengthen the creative, and potentially transformative, art of missional listening. To this end, I interrogate what happens when we share stories in the light of some of Paul Ricoeur's philosophical notions. I offer the *Parklife* stories and the peculiar philosophy of Ricoeur to those considering the importance of biographical stories, who want to think this through at a deeper level and are up for a little speculative philosophy to achieve this. Ricoeur's work, and in particular his

later book *Time and Narrative* (1984), has been described as offering "the finest example of contemporary philosophical hermeneutics and is one of the most significant works of philosophy published in the late twentieth century" (Wood, 1991: xiii). I have more modest aims. I plan to develop some intriguing ideas Ricoeur has about narratives, time and identity. I have found these useful in discerning how and why stories are transformational. Ricoeur suggests that stories are the primary way that we make sense of our lives and the means by which we come to understand and represent our identities. Storytelling shapes the shared world between the listener and the storyteller. For Ricoeur, human speech and actions operate in a similar way to texts. This means that a story can take on new meanings and work within those who have heard them long after the storyteller has finished speaking. Stories are generative.

Mining the *Parklife* project for its missiological content has deepened by appreciation of missional listening as ministerial practice. It has also led to some working propositions which might be helpful to other missional leaders and communities.

The original *Parklife* project

I am a co-vocational Baptist minister and lecturer in sociology. I have been researching experiences of homelessness for several years to explore how grassroots communities can assist transitions from street sleeping. My research includes the contribution of my own church's advocacy project.[1] During the 2020 Covid lockdown I found myself working from home and spending the permitted hour of outdoor exercise in my local park. I noticed that a group of street drinkers and others I knew to be homeless had taken up daily residence there. Despite the shifting demographics of the park, they had maintained ownership of a circle of six benches around a cenotaph. I observed how this group were ostracized within the increasingly busy park. To my sociological imagination, my local park became a site rich with forced interactions between widely differing cultures. The park became a place to contend for space, to label those who felt threatening, but also a place for communality and care. I recognized

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1 My church set up a separate community organizing charity almost 30 years ago www.bonnydowns.org and a bespoke project to address homelessness in our borough www.newwayproject.org. See *Looking for Lydia: Encounters which Shape the Church* in 2019, available from Amazon or www.bonnydownschurch.org.

many of those passing time at the six benches in my role as a volunteer advocate. I knew them as regulars at my church's midweek community meal. Covid restrictions had changed the way these projects operated. Spending time in the park with this "street community" altered the context of our relationship. To my missional eye, the park became a place ripe with the possibility to "be with" a community of vulnerable people I now had less opportunity to "do for" – to borrow Sam Wells' excellent definitions (2018). After an initial period of pondering about what I was witnessing, I asked for ethical clearance from my university and set up an ethnographic research project called *Parklife*.

At first, I simply observed interactions and chatted to people. Later, when I had become a familiar figure, and formal research agreements were in place, I began to invite the regular bench sitters to share stories with me. My methodology was participatory and narratological: I curated stories. To anyone passing, I was just choosing to sit on the same park bench for an afternoon every week and chat to people from the "street community". If they agreed, I would jot down notes about the stories they told me and invite them to tell me more. Undoubtedly, being a familiar face helped foster trust and I adopted the stance of moderate participation of "participant observer" (Howell, 1972).[2] My opening gambit was usually to introduce myself as someone who was interested in stories and ask whether they had one to tell me.

The *Parklife* project involved six months of fieldwork. It offered the opportunity to study huge numbers of everyday interactions and some exceptional ones. It was a snapshot of urban life which may well have been replicated internationally during Covid lockdowns while confined to the particularity of a certain place and the stories of a certain group. I found that stories were currency at the six benches. The park was rich with stories. Twelve participants, nine men and three women, were formal participants. Two of the women had their children with them. All twelve had experienced homelessness in the last eighteen months according to the UK Government's definition (gov.uk, 2021).[3] Four were in the "roofless" category for some of the time during the project. Of these, three had spent some months in hotel accommodation as part of the

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2 I reflect on my subjective position as an activist academic in Mann, 1999.

3 The UK Government definition of homelessness includes: Rooflessness (without a shelter of any kind, sleeping on the street); Houselessness (with a place to sleep but temporary, in institutions or a shelter); Living in insecure housing (threatened with severe exclusion due to insecure tenancies, eviction, domestic violence, or staying with family and friends known as "sofa surfing"); and/or Living in inadequate housing (in caravans on illegal campsites, in unfit housing, in extreme overcrowding).

Everyone In pandemic response in London, which saw 40,000 people affected by homelessness offered immediate, temporary accommodation in hotels and Bed and Breakfasts. One of the participants had refused to engage in the scheme and remained roofless or "sofa surfing" for the duration of the project. Of the remaining eight, six were "houseless" for most of the project, living in temporary hostel accommodation. Another two were currently living in insecure housing. For example one woman and her child were living with her grandparents and sister in a two bedroomed flat. Nine of the twelve participants reportedly spent at least part of everyday (defined as more than five times a week) at the park. The rest spent at least part of more than one day a week there. Most were recurrent contributors, meeting me repeatedly and adding to their stories or sometimes just passing time and watching people use the park with me. Alongside the formal participants were a wider group, mainly of "street drinkers", whose housing classification I did not come to know. The majority of them appeared to be migrant workers who came to the park after their shifts. This group did not give formal consent to participate but had stories to share, which due to ethical guidelines could not be included in the research project. This group were sometimes an audience for stories and this shaped how they were told. Most of the stories were told just to me and these were often returned to over a period of time, either being repeated or expanded. How they were retold became an important feature of the *Parklife* study.

In terms of research design, the original *Parklife* project was broadly an *emic* approach in that it investigated how the street community thought and interpreted events. *Parklife* was intentionally set up to allow the participants to lead and shape the scope of the conversations and sought to understand the stories from within street culture. This later reflection is more *etic* in approach as I consider the original findings and draw conclusions from my own perspective as a missional leader, which is a different cultural perspective.

Reflecting on the stories of *Parklife:* stories of victims and heroes

The stories curated in *Parklife* were as surprising as they were illuminating. Many of stories I listened to had recognizable themes. I heard many tales of victimization, of battling "the system". I was struck by the personification of organizations and governmental departments – "the social", "the housing". Often these narratives pitched the storyteller against a personified adversary, one bent on denigrating them. Sometimes the storyteller would return over the

course of the weeks and bring paperwork to show me, official letters presented as evidence. Folded and well-worn, these were offered as the objects which framed the plot – the letter from "the housing", the court summons, hospital appointments.[4]

> "See … [shows me a letter which appears just to be an appointment schedule] I had evidence. I have it here. They should have talked to my doctor."

I ask for clarification, "Who should have?"

> "The housing. They were bang out of order. I have all the evidence. See there's this one back in 2005. I have this from years ago. I have proof. Look. I was under the hospital. They had no right."

Or another time:

> "They don't give a fuck. They do it to get me down. They'd probably like it if I give in and just fucking do it."

"Do what?" "Who doesn't care?" I ask.

> "Just fucking top myself. Here in the park. I could. I could. I won't though. But they want me to."

"Who wants you to?"

> "The housing. Those. Those people. They don't give a fuck."

And later,

> "Don't tell the social I'm here."
> "They didn't win. I got that claim."

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4 In places, the storytellers used strong language. This language is retained in order to accurately reproduce the reality of the stories (Editor).

Over the years, volunteering in a church-led advocacy project, I have heard many such stories. Encounters with statutory systems seemed to frame many of the life-stories I was told.

Less expected were the frequent heroic narratives. These included stories of intervening in fights, getting people out of trouble, overcoming the odds:

> "It was kicking off here last night. Fucking mental. It was. It was. [laughs] It was the full moon or something. Fucking mental … He was well out of it. No-one could get him straight. He was all for having it out with [anonymised]. I don't know what would've happened if I'd not been around … See him? I saved his life!"
> "You know [anonymised]. She's had it rough. Honest Sally she's been right through it. All these fuckers taking her stuff off her and all. Not a penny … She would not have survived without me."
> "I told him. I did. I got him down there [to the hospital] and I said 'He's not leaving 'til someone sorts this!' … I stayed with him. Probably saved his life."
> "They've not won. They've not won. I'm not letting this go."

"Who?" I ask.

> "The social. They've not won. I'm not letting them off with this. They don't know who they are messing with."

The stories seemed larger than life and were often retold to me as others arrived in the group and provided a new audience. Sometimes people were invited to validate the story:

> "I did, didn't I?"

At other times there was somewhat of a contest around who was telling the story, a battle for ownership:

> "Who's telling this? Who's telling this?"

Alongside the victim and hero stories were other stories of loss and bereavement. There was a quietness to these, and they were usually told to me on my own. These stories were often prefaced with "Do you remember…" or "You know… [this person]?". It was clear that the loss might only be shared if I knew

who they were speaking about. I heard stories of three deaths in the duration of this project – of people's close friends, all of whom seemed to have died from the long-term health effects of problematic substance use. These stories seemed less rehearsed, and I could not tell how they were being incorporated into any larger system of meaning. They were sad stories. I did not experience these stories being cast as victimization narratives. The deaths were not explained in that way, but simply as sad losses. The context of these deaths needs to be situated in the fact that homelessness and street life too often have fatal consequences. The UK Office for National Statistics (ONS) estimated that 726 people experiencing homelessness died in England and Wales in 2018. This is a 22% year-to-year increase and the highest since estimates began in 2013. Data suggests that most deaths among people experiencing homelessness were caused by drug-related poisoning, suicide, and alcohol-specific deaths (Aldridge, 2019).

There were many other stories gathered from the six benches. A few were childhood and teenage recollections, sometimes prompted by the presence of children among the group. But the prized stories were the ones about taking on systems, and of being a "face", a known figure who resolved others' problems and kept things in order.

Using thematic analysis to explore the *Parklife* stories, the primary theme was "victimhood". The next theme was "tragic", stories that could be grouped together as tragedies which happened to others. However, stories of "pleasant" events and memories featured next and a surprising number of these featured "heroic" personal content.

We all use self-authoring narratives. In thinking through stories from a missional standpoint, it may be useful to think about the relationship between stories and identity more closely. I suggest that Paul Ricoeur's general framework, and his particular notion of "emplotment", helps us to appreciate the extent to which a person attempts to make sense of their identity, their relationship to others and their place in the world, through telling stories. This suggests that inviting and attending to a story encourages the process of identity formation and can even shape it. To this end I offer a summary of Ricoeur's broad framework and some of his key ideas which might shape how we perceive missional listening.

The broad philosophical context of Ricoeur's ideas

For Ricoeur, stories are an act of *mimesis*. Stories are mimetic as they attempt to reproduce events from one time or place within another. In Ricoeur's words, they are "the imitating or representing of action in the medium of metrical language" (1983/1984: 33). Ricoeur draws from Aristotle's understanding of stories and understands story as mimesis. He adopts the idea of emplotment to theorize how mimesis occurs. Every storyteller is therefore also an editor, choosing which elements to bring together or leave out, inferring or explicitly commentating on events, shaping the plot, bringing it to a resolution.

"Emplotment" is one idea within Ricoeur's understanding of narratives and identity. In a three-volume work called *Time and Narrative* (1984-88), Ricoeur described the relationship between narrative discourse and human experience. He finds that to be human is to tell stories. Stories are "the privileged means by which we re-configure our confused, unformed, and at the limit mute temporal experience" (Ricoeur, 1984: xi).

At the end of the third volume, Ricoeur announces that his philosophical exploration has been in search of an answer to the question "Who?", "Who am I that I can be spoken of in so many different ways?" (1988: 274). He considers narrative and time to address an existential question of selfhood.

For those conversant in this field, Ricoeur's notion of the subject is not essentialist; he speaks of the self in terms of act and potentiality rather than substance. The subject's identity is not fully stable and tangible, but neither is it completely incoherent. Ricoeur's concept is not the completely decentred subject posited by Foucault and other postmodernists. Neither does Ricoeur fully situate the subject within language as Derrida does. The difference, philosophically speaking, is how Ricoeur handles issues of agency and being. The self, as Ricoeur understands it, is the idea and reality of a person capable of testifying to their own existence and acting in the world. This self has agency but is also acted upon, one that can recount and take responsibility for its actions. Telling stories is one way to exert this responsibility and agency. It an act of active interpretation. Through the stories we tell about ourselves we aim to *discover* rather than impose a narrative identity.

Ricoeur's understanding of narratives has encouraged me to interrogate the nature of storytelling and attend to how a person attempts to make sense of themselves and the world through this. This approach asks me to set aside the desire to check out the veracity of the story. To use theological language, this is a true expression of "being with" a person (Wells, 2018). A deeper understanding

of how this works can strengthen missional listening skills. Even the most exaggerated and unlikely narrative need not be cast as "telling stories" but as the important act of story telling.

Ricoeur: Emplotment and the storyteller as an active interpreter

As we tell a story, we organise events in ways that generate meaning, creating an intelligible whole from many parts. Its' telling "pursues and reveals meaning" (Ricoeur 1983/1984: 65). We choose where to position ourselves within the story and this is how we discover a sense of selfhood. Ricoeur recognizes that this sense of identity is not written on a blank slate. We have a pre-existing idea of how reality is organized, "a preunderstanding of the world of action, its meaningful structures, its symbolic resources, and its temporal character" (Ricoeur, 1984: 54). Moreover, in telling stories we actively shape and interpret this realm. We tell stories to make sense of the world, but this also involves fitting events, imagined or memorialized, into the framework of our worldview. We fit together the parts of a story, the "what, why, who, how, with whom, or against whom" (55) into "meaningful structures" (54) which pre-exist our telling of this particular story. Sometimes, this is very apparent. "Once, upon a time …" invites us into a certain imaginary, but pre-existent, mental space. So does, "You'll never guess …". These structures also open possibilities for future landscapes.

Many of the "victim" stories at the six benches took place in a world where systems were, at best, uncaring, but were frequently described in terms of their imagined malevolence. This is not my pre-existing worldview. Listening closely to the stories it was obvious that early criminalization and experiences of social welfare systems framed the lives of many of the participants. This was the world within which they were attempting to make sense of themselves.

It was not just the *Parklife* stories which seemed rooted in social marginalization and multiple deprivations. Interactions within the park were also shaped by invisible power structures. In the *Parklife* stories I found the primary interaction between other park users and the group at the six benches was one of outright avoidance. Occasional rowdiness and acts of deviance were perhaps reactions to ostracizing practices by the other park users.

> Paths criss-crossed the circle of six benches, but these were rarely used by other park visitors. The circle of benches acted as a shibboleth. As well as circumventing the physical space, other avoidance techniques included not looking in the direction of the benches, passing by quickly, and avoiding eye contact. These were very apparent to me but not commented on by any of the bench participants … I witnessed ostracising practices many times in the park. Perhaps the very act of gathering as a loosely defined group countered this to some extent? It is much harder to ignore a group of a dozen or so people. I wondered if the loud greetings among the group, which seemed exaggerated at times, and the frequently shirtless chests of the men, went some way to counter feelings of invisibility. (Mann, 2021: 131-2)

On reflection, the story's "spectacle" or setting may provide an insight into why "victim" stories featured so regularly. Perhaps those at the six benches knew how others viewed them and were attempting to make sense of how this had happened.

Personifying the structural causes of marginalization might be one way to explain feelings of persistent battle and threat. This "emplotment" technique situates the storyteller's identity into a world of battle and contest. The street homeless are not the only community to personify adversarial powers. Might there be some theological resonance here? An example of the personification of negligent social institutions appears in Walter Wink's analysis of *Naming the Powers*. Of course, the social context of marginalization was also a context for the "heroic" stories. These narratives confer dignity and status. They might be appreciated as similarly imaginative responses to marginalisation, as attempts to shore up identities for those experiencing social invisibility.

There was often a palpable feeling that the storytellers were trying to make sense of the things which had happened to them. Some stories jarred and shifted in subjective positions and grammatical tenses. The stories would ricochet in different directions if others joined at the bench, suggesting that the audience did indeed shape the story (a point I will return to in a consideration of how a story's meaning is co-created).

Sometimes "emplotment" involves dissonance as well as coherence. This too is telling. Ricoeur invites us to notice the "concordant discordance" as elements of a story fit into meanings and others resist them (1986: 66). This is surely how many of Jesus' parables work. They lead you along a known path and then subvert where you arrive with a discordant element (for example

Lk. 10.25-37; 14.15-24; 15.11-32). In terms of autobiography, dissonance may flag up shifts in identity creation. Elements of the story which seem to jar with the overarching sense of meaning may point to shifts in the way the storyteller positions themselves as they tell the story. Perhaps they are aware that they are revealing more then they intend. Or that the listener is not reacting as they expected.

I recall one *Parklife* story about a fight which had this subjective shift. It had begun as a glorification of the participant's role in a fight but shifted to describe how they held someone else back and "saved their life". Was this dissonance between aggressor and hero due to the storyteller's awareness that I was unimpressed by boasts of violence? Did they adjust their identity in the story because of this, or because they saw an opportunity for a more heroic narrative?

Riceour invites us to pay attention to stories as windows into the ways an individual attempts to sense of the world and their place within it. We should expect this to be ongoing and their sense of identity to be plural. Constructing a sense of self through narrative identity is "an open-ended, incomplete, imperfect mediation, namely, the network of interweaving perspectives of the expectation of the future, the reception of the past, and the experience of the present" (1986: 207).

Working Propositions to consider in other contexts:

1. **Learn to see the power of "story telling" inherent in even the most unlikely stories. Where it's appropriate, stop interrogating for accuracy, and listen for the authentic account of how the storyteller attempts to discover a sense of selfhood.**
2. **Attend to the frameworks of pre-existing belief implicit in stories. These tell us where a person is at as much as the events they recount. Also listen out for the dissonances – these are places where change might be emerging.**

Ricoeur: Stories bring the past, present and future together

Stories are very interesting in terms of how time works within them. Ricoeur is a dense read on this, but it is worth the mental stretch. In *Time and Narrative* he takes issue with all preceding philosophical accounts of time, from Aristotle through Augustine, Kant, Husserl and Heidegger. He offers instead, and with planned provocative confidence, a hypothesis that "narrative is the guardian of time" and that "time becomes human time to the extent that it is organized after the manner of narrative" (1984: 3).

Ricoeur's argument is complex. He argues within a tradition which has struggled to conceive of time in terms of how we experience it (a phenomenological approach). He suggests a definition which takes seriously how identities are constructed through narratives and how these create illusions of unitary time by bringing past, present and future together in a transitory moment. He sees this happening at historic levels, for example in the creation of national identities through the stories a society chooses to tell about itself.

It also happens at the level of an individual life. This is where, as a missional leader, I find his ideas most compelling. Ricoeur brings time, identity and narrative together:

> What counts here is the way in which every day praxis orders the present of the future, the present of the past, and the present of the present in terms of one another. (1984: 60)

The past is present in a story through the obvious fact that we are re-presenting events, but beyond this, there is the non-linear work of symbolism at a sub-textual level. The story is not merely experienced as linear, even if the narrative appears chronological. Telling a story draws on preexisting meanings from deeper, past stories. The meaning of a new story is drawn from ideas and themes in other periods, and they become present too. We recognize this in the presence of archetypes in stories – such as how we speak about heroes and villains. Repetition of recognizable stereotypes, inference and connotation to myths are present in the most everyday stories (Hall, 1999). They are not merely shorthand. They bring the past into the present, and vice versa.

Biblical parables, and all stories with twists, are especially interesting in terms of how time works within them. We are invited to rethink them from their endings. So, "to understand the story is to understand how and why the successive episodes led to this conclusion" (1986: 66). Once we have heard them,

we may have to rethink *how* we heard them. Ricoeur describes this as gaining the ability to "read time backwards" (1986: 66) a process which involves coming to see that the end is present at the beginning and the beginning becomes meaningful at the end.

We make sense of events in an autobiographical story by pulling together a character which represents ourselves. This might be the narrator. We situate this subject within a moral universe where choices matter, and meaningful connections are made between events and effects. Emplotment is a "reading back into events" that opens up the possibility of reading forward into the subject's actual future choices and actions. There is the potential for stories told today to change tomorrow's choices and the way we understand ourselves.

The *Parklife* stories victim or hero stories may not be wholly accurate, but they can be transformative. Choosing to tell a story in, for example, a heroic way opens new and real potentials for how an individual may go on to act in future. Stories shape our future "being in the world". Telling stories is a process of mentally organizing the past and understanding future potentialities.

Stories also work by making the future present in the story as they invite the consideration of how the story unfolds. I think of this as the "promise of sequels" that is evident in how the story is told and to whom it is told – its "speculation" as Aristotle says. If I tell you a story about myself as a victim, I may invite your protection and intervention. If I tell you a story about my acts of violence, I invite subservience or contest. Both of our futures are potentially present in these stories. They are generative.

Missional listening and appropriating meaning

When we listen to a person's story and begin to try and make sense of it, we enter the story and the act of interpretation. Ricoeur calls this "appropriation". Meaning is co-produced depending on how we receive the story. It is an interaction rich with the invitation of encounter. Appropriation, application and persuasion are involved as we tell and listen to stories (1986: 52-3). Just as the storyteller is active and generates meaning, the listener does too. Listening to another's stories involves taking up a subjective position in the story ourselves. This is most obvious if we accept the invitation to identify with a character in the story: "Well, what would you have done?" "Do you know how that feels?" But it always happens as we imagine the scene and pick a perspective. In this, the listener is also concurrently producing a sense of themselves. Are they persuaded? Can they identify? Where do they see themselves in this story? What

ideas are they appropriating and what sense do they make of the story they are listening to?

Hence my sociological *Parklife* project was also a lesson in missional listening. It taught me to mentally note repeated phrases, how a retold story grew and developed, or boiled down to its essence. I learnt to pay attention to the use of hyperbole, the oration, the invited response and how the story changed given its "speculation" and audience. I realized that if I listen well, I might discern that something is happening in that moment, with the potential to observe and even participate in the creation of a sense of self. The storyteller is trusting me to see how they pull together a sense of who they are as they try to make meaning from the events of their lives. They edit and I pay attention to how they do this. Listening to a story is a space for "being with" (Wells, 2018). It takes time and the willingness not to cast yourself as a heroic character in this person's story.

Perhaps the potentially transformative power of narratives is most present in the stories people tell in liminal spaces. Liminality is present at borders where an individual is both losing and gaining identity. Liminality can occur through being physically displaced, which was a very common experience during the Everyone In pandemic-motivated offer in London of immediate temporary accommodation, although often in other parts of the borough or much further afield. Where this initiative was successful, Everyone In offered the chance to undertake a process of change; to lose the identity of being "one of the homeless" and begin to see what else might be possible. But we are foolish to reduce homelessness to rooflessness. As many have demonstrated, and I have attempted to explore elsewhere (Mann, 2019b) a sense of belonging, of being a known character in a community, is a key pull factor to transition from the chaos of street life to a new identity in a settled community. It is almost impossible to make this journey unsupported and isolated.

During *Parklife* I noticed the pull of this familiar place in the park and how some would make long bus rides or walks to spend part of every day here. Being a known person in a familiar place shapes the stories we feel able to tell, the processes of "emplotment". Of course, it is not just physical displacement that creates liminality. It can also happen as a person begins to cross into a new identity – for example from street homelessness to settled living. The stories told during these times can help or hinder future choices. I noted this in an earlier research project which involved spending a day walking around sites where one man had lived on the streets for five years (Mann, 2019b). As we walked and I listened I noticed that the subject of the story, the way this man "Dean" spoke about himself, fundamentally shifted when he began to recount volunteering in a local community project as their "Tea Angel". He had heard

himself described this way and it now featured in how he described himself – as a person who was important in the work of helping others off the streets. The project he connected with, NewWay (www.newwayproject.org), was birthed in my own community and has the good sense to avoid replicating the power differentials inherent in the statutory sector. Instead, it uses an "alongsiders" approach, inviting people experiencing homelessness to connect through gardening, food growing, football and cooking. The advocacy part of this project is well embedded in community life. Dean had found a way to think of himself as a respected volunteer rather than a "service-user" or one of the homogenized "homeless". This gave him a way to tell his story which was full of "semantics of action" and involved reading meaning back into his own story to see it as one of beating the odds. He was also now part of a larger heroic community, a bigger story, where there was a shared mission to end street homelessness.

In an earlier work, Ricoeur lays out what he describes as "little ethics": "aiming at a good life lived with and for others in just institutions" (1992: 172). This resonated with Dean's experience of successful transition. The way Dean described himself was full of "concordant discordance" (1986: 66). His story was disruptive. It did not always lead where I thought it might. It challenged my expected appropriation. For instance, being in the places where he had slept out reminded Dean of mostly positive experiences. This was interesting as he also told me about the struggle he currently faced living "behind the walls" of his new accommodation. His mental health challenges were more acute now that he was out of the survival mode of street-sleeping. Ricoeur understood the discordance inherent in autobiography. He suggested it involves dimensions of both being and not being our former selves. Which is why, he suggests, a self is better thought of in terms of the question "who?" rather than "what" a self is.

Listening to Dean's story and those from the *Parklife* participants changed me. This could be also described as one effect of appropriating of meaning from the stories I heard. Once a story is told and is out there "in the world" it is no longer just the product of the narrator. In its telling, another kind of work of identity formation is possible, one that takes place within the listener. My most vivid recollection of how this happened during the *Parklife* project was when one participant interrupted his own storytelling saying "Oh I know what you will say. You'll tell me the story's not over yet." I often find myself using this phrase to invite someone to imagine a different ending for the situation they are in. In this case, the storyteller predicted I would do this and interrupted and possibly adjusted their story. Recollecting this, I shift my understanding of who I might be. Could I be the person who injects the potential for hope, the

subversion of an expected ending, in other people's stories? This is potentially transformative to my own sense of self.

A working proposition to consider in other contexts

3.   Appreciate listening to stories as an act of co-production. A listener needs to stay mostly quiet, but where it's appropriate to do so, they can encourage new and positive emplotment through occasional questions which open new subjective positions: "What would you say to your younger self now?"; "What if this isn't the end of the story – what would you like to see happen?"
4.   Reflect on how you have been changed by the stories you have heard.

Some conclusions: story-rich placemaking

Parklife gave me the opportunity to listen to stories of those caught up in the crisis of homelessness, observe their marginalization in my local park and witness their communality in a site over which they managed to retain a level of control. There was conviviality and a sense of being known among familiar faces. There was drama. I did not witness violence but, over the course of the project, some participants passed off newly acquired injuries and described physical fights as "one of those things". Many spent some part of every day at the six benches. I became convinced that many people fail to make the transition from street-sleeping because "mainstream" society is lonelier, less liveable, and altogether less inviting than *Parklife*. Transitioning from a chaotic life needs an invitation to a better, more compelling "story to find yourself in", to borrow McLaren's words.[5] Statutory intervention alone cannot achieve this. It takes community. And perhaps this is where healthy Christian community comes in. Could local, missional churches be the story-rich places where people are invited to become a known character and join a heroic mission to transform the neighbourhood, all within a grand narrative of resurrection? I believe I see this in my own missional church and in the work of grassroots projects like *NewDay* which are long-term, non-judgmental, radically hospitable and confer

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5 From the title of Brian McLaren's book, *The Story We Find Ourselves In: Further Adventures of a New Kind of Christian* (2013).

new identities. They are not just listening places; they provide advocacy and community organization. They take time to listen to stories.[6]

It is very hard to "out local" the local church. When it expresses mission through radically hospitable expressions of "being with", it offers a place for stories to be told and valued. With some training, and an appreciation of the potentially transformative act of listening, these might become more effective in helping others journey well. The local missional church is ripe with drama and the opportunity to become a known character. It is also "placed" and offers familiar spaces to return to. Of course, this only happens if they are genuinely hospitable. For those seeking models of "being with" as a missional ecclesiology, Ricoeur's theory encourages us that time spent listening to stories is worthwhile. It is even an act of identity recreation, the transformation of the self.

Working propositions to consider in a missional community or congregation

5. Invite people into in a story-rich community, "Remember that time when we …". Local missional communities are ripe with stories and rooted in places where people can become known characters. Let's tell our local stories well and widely.

6. If you are part of a church, think through the stories you tell. Do they use dissonance and imagination? Do they intrigue, invite and discombobulate? Revisit the stories Jesus told, and as we retell them, let's avoid prescribing how they must be understood. If you have sermons as part of your gathering, use local stories to shape them.

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6 For reflection on remaining as a missional practice, see Mann (2022).

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Cultural perceptions: A barrier to the role of cross-cultural friendships in mission? (A Church of Pentecost-UK case study)

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Abstract

This paper, based on original qualitative and quantitative research undertaken as part of my MA studies in African Christianity at Liverpool Hope University, explores the challenges faced by the Ghanaian Church of Pentecost-UK (CoP-UK) in sharing the love and good news of Jesus Christ with White British people, in the specific context of the UK's postmodern culture. Arguing that, in this context, intentional investment by CoP-UK in cross-cultural friendships with White British people is likely to form the essential basis of trust for the discussion of issues of Christian faith, the paper discusses the barriers to engagement

in such friendships posed by a generally negative perception of White British culture. My approach to the original research and to subsequent follow up has been consciously relational and the potential contribution of this approach to future collaboration with CoP-UK, in addressing cross-cultural barriers, is also explored. The findings have potential relevance for other Black Majority Churches (BMCs), for other minority ethnic churches, and for everyone who is concerned to enable the God-given contributions of all ethnic groups to be "brought to the table" in God's wider evangelistic mission.

Keywords: Black majority church; Cross-cultural friendship; Postmodern culture; Mission; Multicultural church; Evangelism

Introduction

It is important to clarify at the outset that I am White British and, until my first encounter with the Ghanaian Church of Pentecost-UK (CoP-UK), was unfamiliar with it. While the challenges of cross-cultural communication must be acknowledged in undertaking the research (if not in language itself, then certainly in associated meaning), it is also possible that my ethnicity added value to the research process in that, as an indigenous member of UK culture, I could reasonably be expected to understand key elements of that culture, and that this has generally been perceived as an advantage in exploring cultural engagement by members of CoP-UK in this particular environment.

The genesis of the research underpinning this paper was a 2020 case study interview, conducted as part of my MA in African Christianity studies at Liverpool Hope University (Neate, 2021). In this interview, a District Pastor from CoP-UK poignantly, powerfully and very honestly reflected on the difficulties faced by members of his church in attempting to evangelize in the UK, in pursuit of the global vision of the international, Ghanaian Church of Pentecost (CoP) to be "a church where members go *to possess their nations* [my emphasis] by transforming every worldview, thought and behaviour with values, principles and lifestyles of the Kingdom of God and thereby turning many people to Christ" (Church of Pentecost, 2019: 18). The District Pastor commented:

> We recognize that we need to break out of our comfort zones.
> Our theme is "possessing the nations," so we need to go out. The
> first-generation African Christians who come to this country
> – whether to study or to work – recognize the [poor spiritual]

state of Western Christianity. You say, "This wasn't as I expected. What can I do?" You have the intention to do it [evangelize cross-culturally], but then the barriers come down; barriers of language, colour and resistance; "Who are you to come and speak to me about God?" Then you begin to withdraw and revert to what you do well. (District Pastor A, 2020)

CoP's global vision of "possessing the nations" is based on a number of biblical references – in the Old Testament referring more particularly to the physical driving out of the enemies of God's people (e.g. Dt. 11:23 (NIV)) and in the New Testament, to the driving out of spiritual forces of evil, such that nations and their peoples today are recaptured as part of God's spiritual realm (e.g. Eph. 6.12 (NIV)).

CoP's evangelistic vision is truly ambitious but, as illustrated by the comments of the District Pastor, there is a significant gap, at least in the UK context, between the visionary goal and the practical reality on the ground – a challenge shared with many other BMCs in this country. Hence this paper can be set within the context of the significant secularization of UK society, the rapidly increasing number of Black Majority Churches (BMCs) and their challenges in engaging with British, postmodern culture. Attempts to bridge this gap require an understanding of the current postmodern culture in the UK and the adoption by CoP-UK and other BMCs of evangelistic methods likely to be successful in this context.

Research literature highlights changes over recent decades in the landscape of faith in the postmodern UK context, in which Christian certainties (including the notion of absolute truth) are challenged, and where there is now greater emphasis on the *relational* and *process* natures of the faith journey. Tentative conclusions that can be reached from the literature include: (a) that friendship is likely to prove to be an important route to connection with White British people in a postmodern society; (b) that this approach runs counter to some of the currently prevalent methods of evangelism used by CoP-UK (particularly, street evangelism); (c) that it is not a "quick fix" route to making Christian converts; (d) that it must be genuine, unconditional and sustained; (e) that it should not be treated as a project nor should individuals be targeted for friendship in a manipulative way; and (f) it will require hard work, an intentional approach and a willingness to break out of circles of ethnic familiarity.

CoP's five-year development and evangelism strategy, *Vision 2023* (Church of Pentecost, 2019), highlights the importance, in attempting to transform communities for Jesus Christ, of learning to engage with those communities

and seeking their good (Church of Pentecost, 2019: 62). This suggests the importance of intentional engagement and relationship building and indeed, the possibility of friendship. Interestingly however, a word search of two key reference documents, *Vision 2023* and the 2020 CoP-UK Trustees Report (CoP-UK 2021), contains no reference to the notions of "friendship" or "relationship". Intentional cross-cultural working is also not significantly developed as a theme. My central research focus was therefore to explore the potential role of cross-cultural friendships between members of CoP-UK and White British people in overcoming the cultural barriers to sharing Jesus' love and good news. However, while cross-cultural friendships may be very significant in addressing cultural barriers, it is important to recognise that their impact will be conditioned by the *attitudes* of CoP-UK leaders and members towards White British culture, affecting the likelihood of, and enthusiasm for, their active engagement. This paper explores the perceptions of White British culture held by CoP-UK leaders and members and how these may be shaping current attitudes both to UK cultural engagement and to investment in cross-cultural friendships. Finally, this paper briefly discusses the relational approach which I took to the research and the impact of this both on the research process itself, and also on the way in which CoP-UK is currently engaging in conversation about potential responses to the research outcomes.

The Church of Pentecost

Since its origins in 1937, CoP has extended its reach to become an international church (Onyinah, 2020: 184). By 2021, CoP was operating in 136 nations with a worldwide membership of 3,901,400, organized within 24,773 local assemblies (Church of Pentecost 2022). CoP operates within a centralized structure, with CoP in Ghana remaining the dominant element.

Membership of CoP-UK in 2020 (the latest available at the time of writing) was 21,248, organized through 162 Akan and English-speaking assemblies (Church of Pentecost-UK, 2021: 3). The English-speaking assemblies, known as Pentecost International Worship Centres (PIWCs), and representing some 40 percent of all assemblies, were first introduced in the UK in 2002 (Nyanni, 2018: 122), with the aim of providing a "well-structured, multicultural church, primarily for people of non-Ghanaian background" (Nyanni, 2018: 121).

Every five years, CoP issues a development plan (currently covering the period 2018-23), which it expects to be appropriately implemented locally in its churches across the globe, using the "spirit of the vision to explore community

interventions that are relevant in their respective societies to ensure that we take the nations for Christ" (Church of Pentecost, 2019: 18).

Key evangelism *goals* are set out in *Vision 2023* and tangible *actions* taken in response by CoP-UK are outlined in the Trustees' Annual Reports (the latest being for 2020). Although these highlight a broad range of social engagement activities, a strong focus continues to be placed on traditional means of evangelism (albeit adjusted for the impact of the coronavirus pandemic), for example, tracts distribution, door to door visiting and street preaching – essentially "transactional" rather than "relational" methods.

Key issues from the literature

Three specific areas of literature provide relevant background for this research project: (a) the challenges for BMCs in working cross-culturally; (b) the changes in social context in which evangelism is taking place in the West's postmodern culture; and (c) the positive role of relational approaches to evangelism within this culture.

Postmodern culture

Frequent reference is made in this paper to postmodern culture (McGuigan 2006). Before reviewing the background research literature, it is important to outline briefly the key characteristics of this phenomenon. Brian Duignan (2020) suggests that essential aspects include: (a) denial of absolute or real truth; (b) scepticism toward overarching theories and certainties in knowledge; and (c) markers of pluralism [embracing many different religious systems and ways of thinking], self-referentiality [essentially, truth is as determined by the individual] and moral and knowledge relativism [morality and knowledge are just one way of seeing things, and there are others]. While there are clearly many sub-cultures within White British culture, I believe that the powerful overlay of postmodernism within the UK provides a useful general framework for analysis.

Cross-cultural challenges for Black Majority Churches

At a time when Europe is becoming increasingly secular (NatCen Social Research, 2017), BMCs can often see their role as being to rescue Westerners from their "spiritual wilderness" and Western churches from a "state of apostasy" (Adogame, 2011: 81). By contrast to this Western secularization trend, the past 70 years have seen an enormous *expansion* of BMCs in the UK. These churches are now operating, in effect, in a new mission field (Adedibu, 2012: 47-49; Kwiyani, 2020: 34). The challenge however, for CoP-UK and many other BMCs which are trying to seize the new mission opportunities, is to find a way that enables them to move beyond their narrow, core ethnic bases and to penetrate the indigenous White British communities surrounding them.

The experience of many African migrants to the UK has been a feeling of alienation in a "strange" White British culture, sometimes accompanied by hostility and rejection by both White British people and the White British Church (Kalu, 2010: 9-34; Aldred, 2007; Burgess, 2011: 255). Against this background, BMCs have often provided mutually supportive communities and places of safety for their members (Kalu, 2010: 19). However, these "places of safety" have frequently become insular and defensive, generating a form of "fortress" outlook among their members, and fostering generally negative attitudes toward White British culture. They have also adopted a form of quasi military language in their evangelism strategies. An example is CoP's use of the phrase "possessing the nations", which is partly in response to the perceived hostile environment, but also driven by ethnic culture and theology (Adedibu, 2013b: 405-23; Mtata, 2011: 345). At a time when it is important for BMCs to engage effectively with White British culture, these evangelistic approaches are very likely to have the opposite effect to that desired, with their apparently excessive (if metaphorical) territorial claims being antagonistic to British culture (Neate, 2020: 12-13).

The processes of understanding and engaging effectively with White British culture appear essential tools in enabling BMCs to make evangelistic inroads among indigenous British people, yet BMCs have often been criticized for their inadequate efforts in this area (Adedibu, 2013b: 407, 418). Israel Olofinjana (2020: 62) argues that BMCs' church planting strategies must "engage the local people and community in which they are situated". Adedibu (2013a) robustly proposes that BMCs must break free from their cultural captivity, listen attentively and "develop appropriate cross-cultural skills to communicate the gospel to postmodern people in Britain".

Social context for evangelism

In our current, postmodern Western society, previous certainties are questioned and new approaches to evangelism are needed. George Hunter describes it well:

> As the Enlightenment has faded, postmodern people are increasingly suspicious of people and institutions that claim authority, and they are increasingly dubious of ultimate explanations. They are rediscovering their intuition, and they own and trust their feelings more. They take in the world through what they see, touch and experience – not just through what they hear – and they explore spirituality and the supernatural. (2010: 103)

The personal stories told through the lives of Christians therefore become increasingly important, and integrity in their words, actions and behaviours (the incarnation of the gospel) is vital (Hunter, 2010: 103). Challenging his own church, Opoku Onyinah (2014: 128), International Chairman of CoP from 2008 to 2018, echoes this message, arguing, "Whereas modernity emphasized the message of evangelism, postmodernity emphasizes the incarnational message as expressed in a relationship. Evangelistic lifestyles must reflect one's spirituality."

Alongside recognition of the importance of incarnational relationships for effective evangelism in a postmodern context, an understanding of the *journey* by which people become followers of Jesus is also vital. A journey of faith in Jesus is a *process* in which *relationships* are an essential component (Booker, 2005: 4). In other words, relationship comes first, rather than last, and this understanding offers a significant challenge to some of the commonly adopted methods of evangelism used by CoP-UK (Neate, 2021).

Relational approaches to evangelism

A very wide range of evangelistic techniques is deployed in contemporary UK society. Examples include Disciple Making Movements (DMM), Alpha courses, Street Pastors, Healing on the Streets, schools outreach, compassion-based programmes, street evangelism and door-to-door visiting (Booker and Ireland, 2005: 4). Some of these programmes attempt to respond to the need, in a postmodern context, and see faith as a journey or process. Others, however, such as street evangelism, appear to largely ignore the cultural realities of the Western

context. In the essentially one-off transactions that occur between a Christian and a hearer in street evangelism, there is a key missing element – the element of relationship and friendship, and the consequent building of personal trust. Christopher Heuertz and Christine Pohl (2010: 41) rightly ask how we can expect an individual on a UK street to "confess their sins to complete strangers and give the rest of their lives to a God to whom they may have been introduced only a few minutes earlier?" Onyinah (2014: 122) emphasizes the importance of the Church developing practical, relationship-based evangelistic strategies. "Evangelistic lifestyles must reflect one's spirituality: by extending invitations to friends to join and investigate that spirituality through Jesus Christ. This is a *journey of friendship* [my emphasis] where the invited friend is introduced to Jesus Christ and the salvation he offers" (Onyinah, 2014: 128).

With friendship very much on the agenda then (Evangelical Alliance 2012), it needs to be recognized that there is also a risk of friendship *evangelism* being viewed as an "instant fix" to the challenge of cross-cultural mission, with people who are not yet Christians "targeted" as friendship evangelism "projects". This is something to be avoided at all costs. As Heuertz and Pohl (2010: 42) argue, "Befriending someone *merely so you can tell them the gospel* is a form of manipulation and a violation of trust." Rather, the demonstration of true love for someone who is initially a stranger is surely to value them authentically, consistently and unconditionally.

Research approach

The overall objective of this research project, undertaken in early 2021, was to explore whether cross-cultural friendships by members of CoP-UK with White British people might offer a potentially more effective means of sharing the good news and love of Jesus Christ than the more traditional evangelism approaches currently used by CoP-UK. While summary data is included in this paper for all key areas included in the research, the particular focus here is on the experiences and attitudes of CoP-UK members and leaders towards White British culture. Taken together these are important influencers of cross-cultural engagement and friendship.

Research methods and metrics

A mixed methods research approach, using questionnaire, semi-structured interviews and focus group discussion, enabled the quantitative data from questionnaire-based responses to be cross-checked with the in-depth, qualitative data collected via individual and group interviews and discussions (Cresswell and Cresswell, 2018: 217). Three, geographically spread CoP-UK Districts (Reading, Leicester and Leeds) formed the basis for this research, generating 143 completed online questionnaires. Fifteen Zoom-based, semi-structured interviews took place (five each from the three Districts), with participants holding a wide range of roles and offering a broad spectrum of perspectives. Finally, an evangelism leaders focus group discussion was held (five participants nominated from the three research Districts). This provided the opportunity to reflect on key themes emerging from the semi structured interviews and to discuss these in a broader CoP-UK leadership context.

A good overall gender balance was achieved, with a 52:48 male to female ratio among questionnaire respondents. Almost half (49 per cent) were aged 18-34, with well under ten per cent aged 55 years or older. Akan-speaking assemblies have an older demographic, with nearly 70 per cent aged 35-54. By contrast, in PIWC assemblies, a nearly similar level is seen in the 18-34 age group.

The majority of respondents (83.2 per cent) were born in Ghana, 14 per cent elsewhere and only 2.8 per cent in the UK. Some 72.1 per cent of respondents had lived for over five years in the UK, with 46.2 per cent for more than ten years. However, only 0.7 per cent of respondents reported having lived their whole life in the UK.

The research questionnaire gathered a wide range of participant information, including (a) gender, age, country of birth, length of time living in the UK, area of residence, length of time as a member of CoP-UK, and CoP-UK assembly attended; (b) the composition of participants' close friendship groups; and (c) attitudes toward, and experiences of, friendship with White British friends, and views on White British culture. Attitudinal responses were assessed using a series of statements which participants were asked to score in terms of the extent to which they agreed or disagreed, using a Likert-type, ordinal scale (Jamieson, 2004).

The identification of the ethnicity of participants' closest circles of friendship was based on Robin Dunbar's research conclusion that human beings, irrespective of ethnic background, have a limited amount of social capital to be invested in friendships. Dunbar (2018: 35) suggests that approximately

40 per cent of our total social effort is devoted to just five people (the five most important to us), with another 20 per cent given to the 10 next most important. In other words, 60 per cent of our social effort is divided between just 15 people (those most likely to provide us with support). Using this approach, questionnaire participants were asked to identify, first, their closest five friends, and then, their next closest ten friends. In doing so, they were asked to state the ethnic background of each identified friend (classified as Ghanaian, Black (Other), White British or White (Other)).

Key research findings

Given the need for effective evangelistic approaches by CoP-UK, in the specific context of postmodern Britain, a key measure of success is whether "cut through" is being achieved to the UK's indigenous population and whether White British people can be found as part of CoP-UK assemblies. A disappointing picture is painted by the research however, with Ghanaians forming the overwhelmingly dominant group in the Districts surveyed, with only a tiny representation of White British people (just 0.12 per cent overall). It is important to note that while English-speaking, PIWC assemblies were created to appeal to multicultural audiences and to reach the indigenous population, the evidence from the research suggests that there is no discernible difference in their ability to attract White British members.

The research results clearly show that certain evangelism tools currently adopted by CoP-UK – particularly the ubiquitous street evangelism – may not be working, and that a new approach may be needed. Indeed, only 11.9 per cent of respondents agreed that familiar methods of evangelism from Ghana worked as well in the UK, with two thirds (67.9 per cent) disagreeing.

Two particularly interesting paradoxes are revealed, concerning the potential role of cross-cultural friendship between CoP-UK members and White British people in sharing the good news and love of Jesus Christ. The first of these is that while four-fifths (81.8 per cent) of questionnaire respondents believe it is important to find ways of reaching White British people for Jesus, and nearly three-quarters (72.1 per cent) of respondents believe that making friends with White British people is a good way to share Jesus Christ's love with them, only around half of this number (37.8 per cent) believe that it is important to *have* White British friends (with 30.8 percent disagreeing). This suggests that while the *idea* of friendship with White British people as an evangelistic approach appears attractive to many, a significantly smaller number see

it as their personal role to form such friendships. This disconnect would clearly need to be addressed if cross-cultural friendship were to be developed by CoP-UK as a new route to evangelism.

The second paradox, given the potential for greater levels of in-group community in traditional, Akan-speaking assemblies, is that questionnaire respondents from this constituency report that they are *more* likely than PIWC members to identify the importance of having White British friends. This suggests that counter to expectations and to CoP-UK policy, PIWC members are not necessarily more engaged in the drive for multiculturalism than their Akan assembly friends. This finding is also supported by the questionnaire data showing that there appears to be little difference between PIWC and Akan-speaking assemblies in the number of White British or White (Other) friends reported. While PIWC members report a slightly greater number of friends overall than members of Akan assemblies, this appears to be due to having more Ghanaian friends, rather than a broader demographic of friends.

The research points clearly to the relative lack of White British friends held by CoP-UK members. Seventy-two per cent of questionnaire participants listed *none* of their top five friends as White British and 68 per cent of respondents listed no White British friends among their next ten closest friendships. This paucity of close White British friends was also identified in the qualitative research. It might be anticipated that the younger adult members of CoP-UK would hold a greater number of White British friendships than their older peers (given the multicultural environments of further education institutes, for example). However, analysis shows that a greater proportion of those in the 18-34 age group than the 35+ age group report having their top five friendships with people of Ghanaian and Black (Other) ethnicity.

It is a universal phenomenon that human beings tend to develop close friendships predominantly with people from the same ethnic background (Bagci et al., 2014: 126; Lessard-Phillips, Fajth and Fernandez-Reino, 2020: 9). If CoP-UK decided therefore that increased emphasis should now be placed on building *cross-cultural* friendships in achieving their ambitious evangelistic vision, the current behavioural patterns of its members would need to be radically challenged to encourage the creation of space for friendships with White British people. One consequence would be a substantial break with default, ethnic "self-grouping".

ATTITUDES TO WHITE BRITISH CULTURE – A NEGATIVE LENS?

The willingness and enthusiasm felt by CoP-UK members to engage effectively with White British people and their culture – and the desire to invest in cross-cultural friendships – is likely to be significantly influenced by their attitudes towards that culture. Questionnaire responses gathered in this research reveal that only a quarter (26.6 per cent) of participants report liking White British culture, with 60.1 per cent registering a neutral reaction and 13.3 per cent expressing active dislike. Apart from perceived negative aspects of White British culture, practical communication challenges were also identified as potential barriers. For example, 57.3 per cent of respondents believe that White British people are more direct in their communication style than Ghanaians. This is borne out by research into high and low context cultures, demonstrating that a greater degree of "coded" language is typically used in African culture than UK culture in which communication is more explicit (Meyer, 2015: 29-60). A further barrier was identified in terms of perceived attitudes to privacy, with 53.1 per cent of questionnaire respondents believing that White British people have a greater tendency to protect their privacy. There is also a belief that Ghanaians and White British people seek different things in friendship; 39.2 per cent of respondents affirm this view, with only 26.6 per cent disagreeing. It would be valuable to explore this issue via future research and discussion.

In the semi-structured interviews and focus group discussion, White British culture was often characterized in terms of "bad habits". For example, drinking alcohol and going to nightclubs were perceived as challenges to be overcome through evangelization. One respondent commented, "It might be a cultural thing – but in Ghanaian culture and in my church … we do not drink … and obviously, alcohol is a big part of the British culture. So, if I need to cut through to them [White British people], I will have to go … that's friendship" (Respondent 14, 2021). Considerable wariness was expressed about the moral risks of engaging with White British culture, and the need to "protect the heart" from bad moral influences. Illustrating this point, another respondent commented, "For example, as a Christian, you cannot say I want to have a friend, so let me go to some places that for us we believe is not right as a Christian to go … like nightclubs and the rest" (Respondent 6, 2021).

Overall, a significant tension emerged through the research. While participants were highly motivated by Jesus' modelling of spending time with "sinners" and the marginalized in society, strong fears were also expressed about becoming "polluted" by worldly values, with several respondents citing St Paul's injunction not to be "yoked together with unbelievers" (2 Cor. 6: 14 (NIV)).

One leader participating in the Focus Group discussion raised a particular concern in this context; that strong cultural pressures existed within CoP-UK (and perhaps wider African society) which an individual would need to resist if they were to pursue friendships with those perceived as somehow "unacceptable". The leader asked, "If I am approaching someone who is gay or lesbian, what would the society or the community of my fellow Ghanaians or my fellow Africans [think] when I begin to relate myself with them?" (Member B, 2021).

Interestingly, no positive facet of White British culture was spontaneously volunteered through the research responses (for example, music, theatre, dance, walking, leisure activities, sport, active and accountable democracy). Several explanations are possible. One explanation might be that respondents have not engaged in the breadth of White British culture in a way that would enable them to identify its positive features. Another explanation is that respondents might be aware of the various dimensions of White British culture, but still do not feel positive about any of them. A third explanation is that CoP-UK members perceive White British culture through a dominant, negative lens or narrative, which prevents positive attributes being recognized and appreciated. Some credence was given to this last potential explanation by a member of the evangelism leaders focus group who said, "There may be certain things that you [the British] do. It's not a sin even in the Bible, but then because we have this kind of mentality or mindset about your culture, we will just generalize everything about British people and say [that] what they do is wrong" (Member C, 2021). Ironically, to the extent that the third of these explanations may have some validity, there is a danger of CoP-UK's leadership and members repeating the attitudinal mistakes (but now in a British context) first exhibited by Western missionaries to Africa in the late eighteenth, nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, in which *African* culture was denigrated (Magesa, 2017: 114).

The importance of contextualizing CoP-UK's evangelism approach in the UK *was* however, identified by a number of respondents who recognized that to bring influence in British culture, it is essential to avoid the risk of attempting to superimpose a form of perceived "superior" Ghanaian culture. The CoP-UK should respond to relevant *Western* needs, for example isolation and loneliness, rather than focusing on the more familiar Ghanaian issues related to material need (Focus Group, 2021).

A relational approach

My clear intention from the outset has been that this research should not simply be aimed at achieving an academic goal, but that it should also be essentially *practical*, providing a useful and relevant framework for the leadership of CoP-UK in its ongoing development of evangelism strategy for the UK. With this in mind, I adopted a consciously relational approach throughout. This approach reflected my preferred personal style, but also recognizing its vital importance in gaining support for the conduct of the research and for subsequent relations with CoP-UK. As an "outsider" to CoP-UK, I was entirely dependent on co-operation with the Principal of Birmingham Christian College (a senior leader within the church and nominated contact point for the research) and several District Pastors (effectively "gatekeepers" of CoP-UK) to open the doors to the recruitment of research participants.

This relational style underpinned the semi-structured interviews and Evangelism Leaders Focus Group discussion. The result was that trust was built with interviewees, and free flowing, warm discussion generated, in the examination of a research topic itself focused on the role of cross-cultural *friendship*. Respondents were noticeably open and non-defensive in reflecting on CoP-UK's current attitudes, behaviour and practices, and in considering potential future changes.

It is apparent that intentional development of close cross-cultural friendships with White British people has not previously been a significant element of CoP-UK's overall thinking on evangelism. However, significant enthusiasm for a new approach was identified through this research (and "crystallized" through the research process itself). For example, several respondents described the personal benefit they had experienced from friendships with White British people, particularly in terms of providing opportunities to learn more about White British culture, and calls were made for CoP-UK's leadership to be intentional in providing training sessions for its members on this topic (Focus Group, 2021).

The emerging enthusiasm of research participants for the role of cross-cultural friendships with White British people as a new evangelistic emphasis sends an encouraging signal that this approach has the potential to gain wider traction within CoP-UK. The relationally-based research process, and subsequent discussions with a number of CoP-UK's senior leaders, have already resulted in several positive outcomes. These include opportunities to speak with groups of CoP-UK leaders about the research project, my appointment as Visiting Lecturer at Birmingham Christian College (teaching on my research to

CoP-UK local leaders), an intent to bring together selected leaders from CoP-UK and from the Vineyard Church in the UK (of which I am a member) to discuss the opportunities and challenges of cross-cultural friendships, and a clear desire by the head of CoP-UK in the UK to work collaboratively in progressing the issues identified in the research.

Conclusions

CoP-UK (in common with many other BMCs) experiences a very significant gap between its evangelistic aspiration to "possess the nations" and the practical situation within its individual assemblies, where there are only very low levels of participation by White British people. The literature suggests that in the postmodern context of the Western world, the evangelistic imperative has shifted to a recognition of the importance of the incarnational nature of Christianity (our lives modelling the love and good news of Jesus Christ), the journey of faith understood as a process rather than a one-off transaction, and evangelism pursued best on a relational basis. The data suggests however, that CoP-UK continues to rely heavily (though not exclusively) on various forms of street evangelism which are essentially one-off transactions, rather than incarnational and relational.

While it is clear from this research that cross-cultural friendship with White British people as a means of sharing Jesus' love and good news had not previously been identified as a priority by CoP-UK (and CoP-UK members have very few such friendships), considerable enthusiasm has been identified for the intentional development of thinking, teaching and practice in this area. The research also identified a largely negative perception by research participants of White British culture, posing significant challenges to engagement with that culture and to investment in cross-cultural friendships. Perseverance in meeting these challenges is likely not only to result in missional benefits for CoP-UK, but also to lead to greater mutual confidence, as the "mystique" of White British culture is progressively penetrated through cross-cultural friendships.

The relational approach adopted both to the research process itself and to follow up discussion, coupled with the refreshing willingness by research participants to reflect on current attitudes, behaviours and ways of thinking within the life of CoP-UK, has enabled the opening up of a very positive dialogue with senior CoP-UK leaders about relevant future action. Initial feedback from senior leadership of CoP-UK suggests that while the results of this research echo general understandings of the situation already held within the church, the crystallization provided by the data provides a powerful impetus for action.

The research findings from this particular case study have potential relevance, in the increasingly secular and postmodern UK context, for other Black Majority Churches, for other minority ethnic churches, and for everyone who is concerned to enable the God-given contributions of all ethnic groups to be "brought to the table" in God's wider evangelistic mission. Readers are invited to consider how these research findings might be applied in the various settings in which they are active, aware that the detail of application will need specific local adaptation.

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Leading from the liturgy

Ordained ministers as facilitators of a communal process of interpretation

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Abstract

This article seeks to contribute to the reflection on ecclesial ministry from the perspective of the *missio Dei*. The gateway chosen is the unconventional image of ecclesial ministry as depicted in the Polish film *Corpus Christi*. Jan Komasa, the director, paints the protagonist as a facilitator of a communal process of interpretation and reconciliation through which the core of the gospel becomes concretely visible in social reality. This cinematographic portrayal of ecclesial ministry is then used to look at the situation regarding ministry in a small Reformed denomination in the Netherlands. The issues highlighted in *Corpus Christi* also play a role in these churches. To see if the imagination of *Corpus Christi* can also be made fruitful for thinking through a Reformed theology

of ministry, two steps are then taken. First, it will be shown that within the Reformed tradition there are starting points for the view of the ordained minister as a facilitator the process of interpretation. Then, using the thoughts of Michael Moynagh, the article explores how this vision of ministry can be made fruitful for the current missionary situation in the West. The article concludes with three elements needed to implement the image of the ordained minister as an interpretive guide.

Keywords: Homelessness; *Corpus Christi*; Film; Interpretive guide; Michael Moynagh; Ordained ministry

Introduction

In the Polish film *Corpus Christi* director Jan Komasa tells the story of Daniel, a young convict who is paroled and sent to a rural village to work in the local lumber mill. Once Daniel arrives in the village, however, he poses as a clergyman and is asked to replace the old pastor who is ill and must temporarily leave the village for treatment. Although he initially accepts his new "calling" hesitantly, Daniel gradually grows into his role and becomes a beloved pastor.

The strength of Daniel's ministry manifests itself particularly in his unorthodox handling of the drama that has recently taken place in the village. About a year before his arrival, a terrible car accident occurred in which seven villagers were killed. Six young people, under the influence of alcohol and drugs, and an adult villager with a history of drinking had collided head-on. The tragedy created a deep rift between the parents of the adolescents and the widow of the solo driver. This rift is reflected in the fact that the driver's body is not buried in the village cemetery and his picture does not hang at a memorial in the middle of the village.

Initially, Daniel encounters great resistance when he brings up the accident and the underlying accusations, but by the end of the film it appears that his unconventional approach has resulted in a (beginning of) reconciliation between the widow of the solo driver and the parents of the other victims. Unfortunately for Daniel, he has already been exposed at that point and must return to the detention centre to face his own demons.[1]

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1 The violent ending of the film is puzzling. Once back in the prison, a bloody struggle unfolds between Daniel and another prisoner who is targeting him. Daniel gets the upper

Corpus Christi lends itself to various interpretations and can be understood in different ways. For example, the film can be seen in light of the contemporary post-modern search for identity, with Daniel struggling to define who he is. For the purposes of this article, however, I would like to take a different approach and read the film as an entry point for reflection on the Reformed theology of ministry from the perspective of the *missio Dei*. It may not seem very sensible to begin an article on the Reformed theology of ministry by discussing a motion picture about a Roman Catholic pseudo-priest, but I am convinced that *Corpus Christi* can be helpful in imagining what (Reformed) ordained ministry can mean in today's post-Christian culture.

ROUTE

The route of this article is as follows: After briefly reflecting on the main issues emerging from *Corpus Christi*, I want to turn my attention to the Reformed denomination to which I belong, the *Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken* in Nederland (CGKN).[2] With the imagination of *Corpus Christi* in mind, I briefly reflect on the main challenges of ordained ministry in these churches. Then, with the fruits of this in view, I pause for a moment to consider the historical roots of the Reformed theology of ministry, to see if there are historical starting points for further reflection. I will then return to the present and give my attention to what Michael Moynagh writes about missional leadership. I conclude by describing some steps that I believe are needed to improve the practice of Reformed ordained ministry in a post-Christian context.

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hand in this struggle but is pulled away from the fight by one of his fellow inmates before fatally injuring his opponent. Daniel later manages to escape from the prison. Opinions differ on the interpretation of this final scene. Does Komasa want to show that reality is more unruly than the ideal as it took shape in the Polish village? Or is the emphasis on the fact that Daniel finally escapes his prison? However, since it is not directly relevant to the subject of this article, I will not go into it further.

2 The CGKN is a relatively small Reformed denomination with approximately 70,000 members and 181 congregations spread over the Netherlands. Its origins lay in the secession movement of 1834 (Dutch: *Afscheiding*), but it was not until 1892 that the CGKN was formed in response to the emergence of the Dutch Reformed Churches (GKN) under the leadership of Abraham Kuyper. Confessionally, the CGKN are based upon the so-called Three forms of unity: the Heidelberg Catechism, the Belgic Confession, and the Canons of Dordt). Spiritually the CGKN are characterized by a pietistic slant based on historical affiliation with the spirituality of the "Further Reformation" that emphasized the personal appropriation of faith.

Issues from *Corpus Christi*

I suggest there are three main areas of concern that emerge from *Corpus Christi*.

Mechanical *vs* authentic ministry

First, director Jan Komasa paints a sorry picture of the state of church ministry. The pastor who is to be temporarily replaced by Daniel is an unhealthy old man who has fallen into the clutches of alcohol and has a cynical view of his own parish, which he sees as mostly made up of villagers who do not believe and only go to church out of habit. In addition, it is precisely at the instigation of the old priest that the village turns a blind eye to the unprocessed trauma and the underlying reproaches. It was his idea not to bury the solo driver in the local cemetery and not to hang the picture of him with those of the other victims. The subtext is clear: the church and the pastor are unwilling and incompetent to deal with the real issues of the village and are there merely as irrelevant "givens". Even the rituals in the church are accompanied by computerized electronics that leave little room for spontaneity and authenticity. The film presents the image of a church and ministers struggling with their relevance.

In the face of this sad state of church ministry, Daniel embodies a very different form of priesthood. For one thing, Daniel cannot be caught performing formal rituals in a mechanical manner, but rather his actions are characterized by a high degree of spontaneity and impulsiveness. Thus, Komasa creates the image of a priest, albeit a pseudo one, who is not caught up in mechanical rituals and procedures but, on the contrary, consciously embodies the message of the Bible and church rituals.

(Ir)relevance?

The second, and most pressing, issue runs from this. The old pastor was unable or even unwilling to tackle the great unprocessed trauma and the underlying mutual accusations of his fellow villagers. The church is located in the middle of the village but its minister dodges the problem in the heart of the community. In fact, the old pastor's sigh about the unbelief of the villagers is a self-fulfilling prophecy: how can they possibly believe in the power of the gospel of reconciliation when the church itself is giving it a wide berth by neglecting the deep rift within the community?

In the person of Daniel, it is evident that things can also be different. In many ways he is not an exemplary pastor: he smokes, uses soft drugs, drinks and has sexual intercourse; but when it comes to the core of the gospel, he does not compromise. Regularly Komasa portrays Daniel as a Christ figure, suggesting that in the young ex-convict, unlike the old pastor, something of the gospel does become visible. Daniel addresses the pain and the irreconcilability, even if he encounters resistance in doing so. He does not shy away from publicly confronting the villagers with their own dirt-spewing letters toward the widow of the solo driver. Even when the mayor calls him to order he does not want to give in, yet for the sake of a much-needed reconciliation, he is willing to risk his own status and person. The result is that Daniel, as a facilitator of the reconciliation process in the village, ensures that the gospel is not only heard, but also becomes visible in reconciled relationships. Daniel's ministry serves a vision of the good life where reconciliation in mutual relationships is central and social exclusion is combated. Christian faith according to Daniel is not an individual matter focused on the inner psychological state but serves the good of the community (Marsh, 2018: 167, 170).

Liturgical

A third element offered by *Corpus Christi* is the fact that Komasa does not dismiss church rituals as irrelevant, but rather has the most crucial moments take place right around the sacramental acts. Confession, Baptism, Extreme Unction and the Eucharist all occur as pivotal moments when the villagers come to deeper understanding. This eventually culminates in the Mass celebration after the funeral of the solo driver during which actual reconciliation within the village begins to take shape. In Daniel's hands, the rituals and sacraments are not formal acts, but visible expressions of the gospel. From the liturgical embedding of ministry, Daniel allows the gospel to spread far and wide throughout the community of the village.

Summing up

Komasa's *Corpus Christi* provides a good entry point for thinking about ecclesial ministry. Although the protagonist Daniel is not in any way working toward a preconceived plan, he is clearly leading the community in an interpretive process in which the scope and impact of the gospel of reconciliation becomes

concretely visible in the restoration of damaged relationships. Daniel, as someone who has personally experienced the dark side of life, acts from a vision of the good life and tries to bring the community along with him. He does this by giving himself to the community of the village and by confronting them – through proclamation, sacramental rituals and personal attention (pastoral care) – with issues that undermine the good life of the community. Remarkably enough, Daniel never makes an explicit call to reconciliation, and nowhere does he give an order for rapprochement, but he lets the parishioners take the step to reconciliation themselves. He does not force, but invites to participate in the process of reconciliation, though sometimes rather clumsily. From the liturgy, Daniel is a facilitator of the communal process of interpretation.

The situation in the CGKN

I now focus on the situation of the denomination to which I myself, as a minister of the Word, belong: the Christian Reformed Churches in the Netherlands. Does the picture of the church painted in *Corpus Christi* also apply to the CGKN? And could Daniel's unconventional approach also represent a possible way forward within the tradition of the CGKN? In doing so, it must of course be remembered that this denomination belongs to a different church tradition than the Roman Catholic parish of *Corpus Christi*.

Irrelevance

In 2021 Jan van 't Spijker published a study of the CGKN in which he specifically sought an answer to the question of whether and how the structure of the denomination served its calling to bear witness to the gospel. Spijker focuses his research on the question to what extent the concept of *missio Dei* is reflected in the concrete ecclesiology of the CGKN. It is precisely this emphasis on *missio Dei* that makes his research relevant to this article, since the concept explicitly calls attention to what "God is doing in and beyond the church in His recreational renewing works" and therefore "theology must develop an openness which reflects on what God is doing in the world, in the existing culture and in society, through the Spirit" (Spijker, 2012: 191). In other words: the church should not only focus on the individual salvation of believers, but should instead focus on concrete realities of culture and society in order to connect with the work of God there.

In his research, however, Spijker clearly shows that the CGKN is characterized precisely by a strong pietistic undertone in which the focus is primarily on "individual, spiritual (non-physical), post-mortem categories" and in which "physical and communal aspects of salvation that are already taking place in today's world are only secondary" (2012: 190).[3]

Spijker's observations align with the belief that the concept of *missio Dei* frees churches from an unhealthy focus on their own survival and, on the contrary, directs them towards the concrete well-being of the context in which they have been given a place. Where churches are guided by the *missio Dei* perspective, they are also explicitly focused on the flourishing of their context (cf. Niemandt, 2020).

However, there seems to be a real danger that the CGKN, through its individualistic and spiritual focus – by analogy with the church in *Corpus Christi* – will make itself irrelevant to the surrounding culture by avoiding the questions of society and culture. Where in *Corpus Christi* the problems of the surrounding culture and society became very concretely visible in a collective unprocessed trauma resulting in an additional irreconcilable separation between fellow villagers, there the questions for the CGKN are perhaps somewhat less specific, but certainly no less urgent. I am thinking of the questions in the areas of sexuality, gender, economic justice and ecology.[4] When the CGKN does not address the issues in these (sub)areas, irrelevance is lurking. Only by addressing these questions can the CGKN contribute to the good life of the church and its context.

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3 Spijker acknowledges the fact that there is a clear line from the pietistic perspective to social and diaconal engagement. However, because it is not linked to a theology of the kingdom and is associated with a one-sided perception of the eschatological tension between the "already" and the "not yet", this pietistic slant, according to him, leads to an individual, spiritual (non-physical) and post-mortem conception of salvation.

4 The issue of gender is a sensitive one within the CGKN. In the week after Easter 2022, the synod of the CGKN met and made the decision not to open ecclesial ministry to women. This caused a wave of outrage within a great part of the CGKN. Regarding ecology, I refer to Paul Schrader's 2017 the film *First Reformed* of Paul Schrader from 2017 which tells the story of pastor Ernst Toller who is confronted with a climate activist in his small congregation. In addition to the personal struggles this brings, the film also exposes the impotence of the church to speak out in this area.

Wrestling with ministry

The film *Corpus Christi* can be interpreted as a stimulus to rethink the task and form of ordained ministry in the church. The image of the impotent and sick pastor is symbolic of a powerless and weak ecclesial ministry. This need for reorientation is felt within the CGKN as well. At the synod of 2019 there were no less than ten (partial) reports that dealt to a greater or lesser degree with the question of the essence and form of ecclesial ministry.[5] These reports range from fundamental reflection on ecclesial ministry to some practical issues. From the reports the picture emerges that within the CGKN about ecclesial ministry there is a struggle with concepts like authority, calling, representation, collegiality, and the priesthood of all believers. Also, in several reports the call is made to think through ecclesial ministry explicitly from the *missio Dei*.

There is not enough space here to deal with all the reports mentioned separately, but the picture is clear: within the CGKN there is a great deal of uncertainty regarding ecclesial ministry, and this uncertainty is explicitly related to the need to rethink theology of ministry from the perspective of the *missio Dei*. If this uncertainty is not addressed, ecclesial ministry within the CGKN also risks a high degree of irrelevance.

Liturgical rooting

In *Corpus Christi*, church rituals are the key moments when people come to an understanding or there is a breakthrough in the process of reconciliation. Ecclesial ministry and the (liturgical) rituals of the church are closely connected. The uniqueness and the expressive power of ministry is visible in a condensed way in the sacraments.[6]

This can easily be interpreted as an underlining of the current cultural need for rituals, but from a theological perspective there is also much to be said for it. After all, within most church traditions, ecclesial ministry and the ministry of sacraments are closely linked. Recently the synod of the CGKN pronounced that the ministry of the offices was fully reserved for the ministers

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5 *9.35 p.85-93 cie 7 rapport 13 ambten,* retrieved from: https://cgk.nl/project/rapporten/ (download date: September 26, 2022).

6 Roman Catholic sacramental theology and the Reformed doctrine of the sacraments differ widely. However, due to limited space, I will not elaborate on that in this article.

of the Word.[7] In doing so, the synod was loyal to the Reformed tradition in which from the beginning the right to minister the sacraments was reserved for ordained ministers.

The term liturgical rooting will not be immediately associated with a Reformed theology of the offices, yet there is ample reason to maintain this wording. However, it must be kept in mind that, from an ecumenical point of view, liturgy does not only refer to the ministry of the sacraments, but to the whole of the proclamation of the Word and the administration of sacraments (*Baptism, Euchairst, and Ministry* E §27; Borght, 2007: 230; Koffeman, 2014: 85-6).

Summing up

Looking through the spectacles of *Corpus Christi* at the CGKN, it is striking that many of the struggles are shared. The looming irrelevance of the church that fails to address the questions at hand stands out most, but so do the uncertainties around the essence and form of ecclesial ministry. Komasa's film is helpful in visualizing challenges that lie behind the formal language of church reports. Also, his emphasis on the ritual concentration of ecclesial ministry aligns with the Reformed belief that ordained ministry and administration of the sacraments belong together.

The question that remains open is whether Komasa's portrayal of ministry can be made fruitful for the CGKN. Of course, I do not mean to suggest that ministers within the church should engage in drinking, drugs, tobacco and extramarital sex. Instead, I am referring to the way Daniel, in his capacity as a priest, leads the community in a process of awareness and reconciliation.

The image of the minister as a facilitator of the communal interpretation process is far removed from the role currently assigned to ministers within the CGKN. With some exaggeration it can be said that ministers within the CGKN are trained to shape the interpretation- and embodiment-process on their own. The interpretation of the gospel and its relevance to the community is a matter for the pastors who, as ministers of the Word, expound the Word from the pulpit. The community's role in listening to Scripture is generally limited to attentive listening during worship services. Of course, there are occasional sermon

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7 https://www.rd.nl/artikel/971399-mogen-cgk-ouderlingen-straks-sacramenten-bedienen.

discussions and various topics are addressed at various Bible study groups, but by and large the interpretation is on the preacher's desk. It is not without reason that people often speak of a solo-pastor and a pastor's church (Dutch: *domineeskerk*). Is it any wonder that when the community has hardly any role in the interpretation process, the church members feel little involved and can get the feeling that the church is a pastor's hobby? Is it any wonder that the minister has a somewhat cynical view of the congregation when the congregation is merely a passive listener?

Historical starting points

There are, as is my suggestion, sufficient starting points within the Reformed tradition to think about a different interpretation of ordained ministry. I will mention two examples from the early days of the Reformed tradition.

Martin Bucer's Strasbourg ideal

The first example is the Christian communities in Strasbourg that existed under the leadership of Martin Bucer from 1547. Bucer and his colleagues had until then always moved within the line of what was expected of the church within the sacral community of the pre-modern city state. This loyalty meant a break with Roman Catholic hierarchical ecclesiology on the one hand. On the other hand, however, the magistracy was afraid of too many anabaptist influences, leaving Bucer and his fellow church men little room to shape to the church as a community in which the priesthood of all believers was given concrete form. From 1547, Bucer therefore decided to form small-scale communities of dedicated believers within the existing church structure (see Bellardi, 1934; Spijker, 1996: 309ff.).

These small communities embodied the ecclesiastical ideal of Bucer. In a letter from 1547 in which he countered some objections against the Christian communities in Strasbourg, Bucer laid out what he had in mind. Based upon Ephesians 4 he emphasized that the building of the community is not only a prerogative of ordained ministry, but of the entire congregation. Therefore, there should not only be public meetings in which the gospel is preached by the ministers of the Word, but also specific gatherings of the community in which every member can share the spiritual gifts they received according to 1 Corinthians 14 (Spijker, 1996: 331).

The picture that emerges is that of small communities of dedicated members who were united in a communal process of spiritual discernment. Interpretation of scripture was not confined to ordained ministry but a feature of the entire congregation as a community of interpretation.

Łaski's Strangers' church

A second example concerns the so-called Strangers' church in London under the leadership of John Łaski. This Strangers' church formed a remarkable phenomenon on the Reformed landscape of Europe in the 16th century. Whereas other Reformed churches (such as Strasbourg and Geneva) were largely dependent on the whims of the city councils, the Strangers' church enjoyed a large degree of independence. This fact, combined with the fact that the members of the congregation joined voluntarily, gives the Stranger's church a unique position, which moreover has more in common with the current church situation in Western Europe, than the people's churches in Strasbourg and Geneva (see Becker, 2007; Muylaert, 2021; Pettegree, 1986; Springer, 2007).

Also, in the Strangers' church the community was fully involved in the interpretation process. Here I am thinking mainly of the so-called *Prophetia*. For example, the French-speaking part of the congregation met every Tuesday for faith instruction in their own language. At the beginning of the meeting, a pastor, an elder, or another designated member of the congregation explained a text from the Bible. After this person finished his explanation, another member would follow, also explaining the portion, who in turn would be followed by the next. This went on until there was no one left to give explanations. The meeting was then closed by the one who had opened it. According to Łaski, the abundance of spiritual gifts was evident in the many Scripture explanations and the resulting warnings and consolations.[8]

The purpose of listening to the various explanations was to instruct the community in the interpretation of Scripture. It is noteworthy that during these Thursday meetings not only the pastors were allowed to give explanations of the Bible, but also the elders and deacons and even some other designated members of the congregation.

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8 'Manifeste enim conspicitur opulentia donorum Spiritus sancti in Ecclesia in concordi multarum interpretationum circa unum quemlibet scripture locus varietate et exhortationum simul ac consolationum multarum inde petitarum accomodatione', Kuyper, 1866: II.104.

Łaski's Strangers' church embodied the ideal of Bucer's Christian Communities: small interpretive communities of dedicated members who were united in a communal process of spiritual discernment (Spijker, 1996: 471).[9]

Michael Moynagh's conversational ecclesiology

The two examples above make it clear that the Reformed tradition contains sufficient starting points for thinking about the church as an interpretive community, with the ordained minister leading from the liturgy. Yet, of course, there is a big difference between the situation in the sixteenth century and the current situation of the churches in Western Europe. Whereas churches were more or less at the heart of society in the sixteenth century, this is far from the case today. The church has been pushed back to the margin and is forced to think deeply about its place in society. This implies that the church as a community of interpretation is not only faced with the task of interpreting Scripture together, but also the local context.

In this respect, the thoughts of Michael Moynagh are helpful. Moynagh is a minister within the fresh expressions stream of Anglicanism and serves as director of Network Development and Consultant on Theology and Practice. He is sometimes referred to as the "theologian of fresh expressions of church".[10]

Moynagh (2017) develops a framework of innovation for churches. This framework is based on two pillars. The first pillar concerns innovation as a theologically based phenomenon that propels the church through change towards God's coming kingdom. The second pillar concerns the conversational nature of organizations.

This second pillar in particular is important in the context of this article. Moynagh emphasizes time and again the conversational nature of the church. Following the *Mission Shaped Church* report, he defines the church in terms of

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9 I could also point to other examples from the Protestant tradition, for instance those parts within the Protestant tradition that, inspired in part by Philip Jacob Spener's *Pia Desiderata*, have emphasized the communal interpretation of Scripture, the priesthood of all believers and the reform of theological education. However, I limit myself to these two early examples because they make clear that from the very beginning, the concept of the church as a community of interpretation has been present within the Reformed tradition.

10 https://freshexpressions.org.uk/theology/.

four interlocking relationships: with God, with the community, with the world and with the wider church.[11]

Church leadership

The conversational nature of the church emerges not only in the essence of the church, but also when it comes to its leadership. Leadership according to Moynagh is not a static given, but a dynamic group process. Church leaders should learn how to draw on the gifts of others in areas where they are less qualified themselves.

Leadership as a dynamic process casts the role of the leader in new ecclesial communities in a different light. Instead of developing a vision and imposing it on a community, the leader helps the organization to make sense of what it is experiencing. This does not mean that the organization has no focus, but rather that developing a vision is a conversational group process, with the leader helping the team to make sense of what is happening. Thus, the leader's role is primarily in the area of sense-making.

Church leaders have an essential role in safeguarding the quality of the conversations in the process of sense-making. Although they are not responsible for everything that is said, they do have a great influence. The leader's task is to encourage the participants and improve their conversations. Thus, the most crucial function of leaders is to safeguard the sense-making conversations (Moynagh, 2017: 353).

The most important part of sense-making is "to craft a narrative that connects what is emerging from the kingdom to the team's God-given values and history, however short that history is." Here, the language used is very important because it forms and expresses the underlying mindset of the organization (2017: 32-3). Thus, the leader must be able to help the team connect the narrative of the church to the kingdom of God and find the appropriate language to do so.

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11 According to Moynagh (2017: 241), using the four words *up, in, out* and *of*, as the Mission Shaped Church report does, is unfortunate, because they presume a rather one-directional view of these relationships. Moynagh prefers to speak of relationships, since they flow in two directions.

The interpretive community and the role of the minister

The image of the church as a community of interpretation, as developed by Bucer and Łaski, surfaces again in Moynagh's thoughts on ecclesiology. However, in his case not only the Bible and the Christian tradition are objects of interpretation, but also the context in which the congregation finds itself.

In Moynagh's model, the minister of the Word is an interpretive guide who helps the congregation as an interpretive community to understand the narrative of the kingdom in its context and find its place in it. This means that the minister, based on his knowledge of and feeling for the Bible and tradition, should facilitate the interpretive dialogue within the community. This is fundamentally a two-way street. Participating in public life as Christian communities and individuals automatically brings with it implicit and explicit interpretive activities to which the minister should attend carefully, since they may unveil previously unexplored meanings of the gospel. This listening attitude is also necessary to then relate the normative Christian sources to the concrete lives of the community and its members so that the gospel can land in their reality.[12]

The minister of the Word, from the liturgy, plays a leading role in the process of interpretation, but it is fundamentally the congregation itself that must listen to what the Spirit says to the congregation (Roest, 2018: 21). In line with Augustine, it is the task of ordained ministry to keep the (newly formed) community focused on the common objects of love in a communal process of discernment.[13]

Moynagh's thoughts on leadership seem to fit well with Komasa's portrayal of Daniel as is a facilitator of the communal interpretation process from the liturgy. Moreover, they fit well with the two examples from the beginning of the Reformed tradition. Moynagh's proposal therefore deserves to be taken seriously by churches struggling with the essence and practice of ordained ministry.

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12 The concept of the interpretive guide comes from Gerkin, 1986: 98 ff. and is further developed in Osmer, 2008.

13 Augustine, 1972: 19.24: "a people is the association of a multitude of rational beings united by a common agreement on the objects of their love". Besides theological arguments, contextual arguments can also play a role here. In the present post-Christian era, in which churches are increasingly small communities that are moreover made up of dedicated members who are used to being heard and who are more aware of their context than in the past, the time is passes that the ministers of the Word were solely responsible for the interpretation of the gospel. Also, from a cultural point of view, it is recommended to take seriously the image of the interpretive guide.

Towards a new practice

The image of the congregation as a community of interpretation seems to be a promising starting point for a renewed reflection on Reformed theology of ministry in a post-Christian context. On the one hand, the concept is rooted in the Reformed tradition; on the other, it is tailored to the current missionary situation in which congregations are challenged to interpret their own context as well. The question that remains is what is needed to stimulate development in this direction. And are there any concrete starting points for this in the practice of the CGKN?

In my opinion, three elements are decisive when it comes to answering this question. In random order, they are the following. First, there will have to be an in-depth reflection on the position of the minister. Next, the results of this will also have to be taken into account in the design of ministerial training. Finally, congregations themselves will also have to be supported in the search for a new practice. This has three implications.

First, there is a need for churches and denominations to profoundly reflect on their perception of the ministry of the Word. The days when the ordained minister as a solo pastor was alone responsible for the exegesis of Scripture are over. Reformed denominations should learn again to take the charismatic character of the church seriously. Moreover, the missionary dimension of the ministry of the Word will also have to be further elaborated and substantiated, especially in view of the contextualization of the congregation in its own surroundings.

Within the denomination of the CGKN, the first beginnings of such reflection are already visible. I already noted that several reports on the synod's table speak of a need for reflection on the pastorate. Several reports argue for a renewed reflection on the doctrine of ministry from the *missio Dei*. In addition, one report examines the social trends that influence the pastoral office and concludes that more teamwork is clearly needed. This is not yet the step towards the minister of the Word as an interpretive guide, but it is clear that a change is underway in the perception of the ministry of the Word. This reflection should, however, not only – and probably not even primarily – be limited to voluminous synod reports or in-depth theological literature.

Second, transformed perception of the ministry of the Word naturally has implications for the way future ministers are trained. Within the education of ministers more attention will have to be paid to the missionary dimension of all church practices, to working within teams and to guiding communities in developing and implementing a missionary vision and strategy. In their training

future pastors should be given concrete tools to lead the congregation as interpretive guides. This means that they will not only learn to interpret the Bible with a view to the weekly sermon, but also with a view to fostering the communal interpretation process. In addition, future pastors will need to be trained in reading the social and cultural context in order to lead the congregation in the search for a credible embodiment of the gospel in its own environment. In doing so, it seems to me of eminent importance that this training should not only take place in the ivory tower of the academy but be intertwined with the concrete ecclesial practice of local congregations from the very beginning.

Signs of change are also observable in this area in the CGKN. The then rector of the theological university of Apeldoorn, the educational institute of the CGKN, H.J. Selderhuis delivered the opening speech for the academic year dated Sept. 3, 2018. In it, Selderhuis mentioned that there are questions about the theological and practical baggage that prospective ministers of the Word are given. Are they adequately prepared for missionary tasks, for the practice of ministry every day? The missionary character of congregations will play an increasingly important role. Evidently, then, the training of pastors must take this into account. This also applies to the cooperation that will become more important in the future. Training for teamwork, peer-to-peer coaching and professionalism is a must, according to Selderhuis.[14]

Last, but certainly not least, a changing perception of the church and the ministry of the Word will need to be developed within local congregations. To some extent, this development has already begun because increasing empowerment of 'ordinary' church members, especially in urban areas, makes it progressively more difficult in practice to sustain the role of solo pastor. However, this change will have to be encouraged not only because of cultural influences, but also from the theological belief that the interpretation of Scripture belongs to the entire community, and that the community as a whole should seek a concrete embodiment of the gospel in its own environment.

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14 *9.30 p.1-77 rapport commissie kleine kerken*, retrieved from: https://cgk.nl/project/rapporten/ (Download date January 5, 2022), 46-48.

On this point, too, there are promising developments within the CGKN.[15] For instance, from the national commission for missions, so-called missionary learning paths have been offered in which congregations were guided in the search for a credible embodiment of the gospel in their own context. At the moment, it is not yet clear what the fruit of these trajectories has been, but that there is an increasing demand for guidance at the grassroots level indicates a turnaround.

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15 A clear example of a congregation in the CGKN that sees itself as a community of interpretation is the young Amsterdam congregation *Via Nova* (https://vianova-amsterdam.nl). This community started in the first decade of the 21st century as a church plant aimed at young professionals in the urban environment of the Dutch capital but has recently gone through a profound process of reflection. In the middle of the corona period – and partly due to it – *Via Nova* started a communal interpretive process using Michael Moynagh's concept of 360-degree listening. I was involved in this process as theologian-trainer. Whereas Via Nova initially started from the attractional church model, after the listening process it opted for a cell-church model, in which the focus on the young professionals shifted to focus on concrete presence in the neighborhood of the various house churches.

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Beholding: recovering "right brain" apophatic spirituality for the local church in mission

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Abstract

This article addresses missional spirituality, that is, what spirituality, individual and corporate, is appropriate and fruitful in churches which seek to participate in the mission of God. The paper engages with neuroscience around how the right and left hemispheres of the brain offer two ways of attending to the world; Iain McGilchrist asserts in *The Master and his Emissary* that left brain attention

has predominated especially in Modernity. Two Christian responses which utilize these truths about the brain are critically examined, one from an American, broadly Evangelical school of thought and the other from the Anglican Solitary, Maggie Ross. Ross' recovery of the apophatic stream of Christian spirituality via the right brain of "Deep Mind" is preferred without dismissing other approaches. The article delineates the "unintended consequences" of seeking silence before God who is, including the gift of "beholding" and how they connect to what is required of missional churches. Some brief suggestions are made as to what might be done to enhance the practice of silence in local churches.

Keywords: Christian spirituality; Apophatic; Missional: Church; Neuroscience

Introduction

The question of the relationship between Christian spirituality, both individual and corporate, and how the local church[1] participates in the *missio Dei* is a very live one. I come to this question as both a spiritual director and a consultant to churches in my work with the Church Mission Society. In writing a book on the theology of spiritual direction I articulated a fractal connection I discern between spiritual direction and the missionary task of the church (Chatfield & Rooms, 2019: 157-64). Beyond my own work in spiritual direction I have to say I haven't been that impressed with recent contributions to this question such as the collection of essays in Finn & Whitfield (eds), 2017, which left me feeling there has to be a deeper engagement with the topic. This article is a small contribution to the conversation.

As an Anglican priest of the Church of England I have increasingly valued the belief that, while remaining a Protestant body, my Church is both reformed and catholic – with the emphasis, in the second half of my life, on the catholic and the sacramental. This isn't some partisan commitment as these things are often portrayed. Rather, I have been drawn into enabling churches to become missional, and I have a growing sense that the future of the Western church is dependent on the long Christian tradition before the Reformation. As my

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1 I employ the term "local church" in the title of this article and throughout as an umbrella term for any Christian worshipping community that is embedded in its proximate geography and community – sometimes called the "parish". In the article church without a capital letter refers to such entities alone and Church to the wider denominational body or institution (which may or may not include its local manifestations).

Lutheran colleague in creating missional churches, Pat Keifert is wont to quote from Jaroslav Pelikan that "tradition is the living faith of the dead, traditionalism is the dead faith of the living" (Pelikan, 1984: 65). This article develops my writing about the connection between spiritual direction and the church in mission and the spirituality of leadership in such churches (Rooms and Keifert, 2019). In this article I take a step back into the ancient *via negativa* of the Desert Fathers and Mothers and their successors from the fourth century onwards before placing that alongside current thinking in neuroscience. I will then examine two schools of thought about how to employ neuroscientific thinking in Christian spirituality and discipleship, before coming to some initial implications of this work for the local church in mission.

This paper[2] therefore develops a "turn to the tradition", as we might name it, in my own spiritual journey since, for over ten years now, I have been seeking silence in prayer inspired by the Carmelite tradition, in such giants as Theresa of Avila and John of the Cross. And while many other traditions are available, I trust it contains a challenge to readers to mine the riches and resources that we have at our disposal from our forefathers and mothers in order to be the church faithfully in our own day.

Background: Why spirituality matters in missional churches

Ever since the work of Lesslie Newbigin and David Bosch in the late twentieth century it has been clear that the Western, so-called "mainstream" churches, both Protestant and Catholic, have been in the midst of a paradigm shift. In the world around them and in their theology of mission there have been massive changes that accompany the end of the modern, colonial era since around 1950. The well documented numerical decline of such churches is at least in part attributable to their inability to change their behaviours and culture to meet the world as it is in the *here and now* as opposed to the world as it was seventy years ago. They have become vulnerable even to death, because they have

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2 The writing here began life as a paper at a meeting of the *International Research Consortium* in Adelaide, Australia and the *International Association of Mission Studies Conference* in Sydney, Australia in June-July 2022. I am grateful to those who commented on it in those places. Another shorter version was a contribution to a Festschrift book of essays to be published in 2023 in South Africa in honour of Frederick Marais.

increasingly lost the ability to embody their faith in the incarnate one publicly in the neighbourhood (Walls, 2002: 30).

David Bosch (1991) for the Protestants and Steve Bevans & Roger Schroeder (2004, 2011) for the Catholics presented the concept of *missio Dei* as the required paradigm shift in theology which is brought forth by the concomitant paradigm shift in the world. This is the understanding that God *is* mission and therefore missionary by very nature and being, crossing boundaries in creation and redemption. Such theology turns upside-down the inherited understanding of how missionary work occurs under conditions of modernity – and also the powers that came with State-Church acting during Christendom. Thus, to turn to some well-coined phrases, "it is not the Church of God that has a mission in the world but the God of mission that has a Church in the world" and the task of that Church is therefore to "find out what God is doing and join in". A note of caution here however, again from a "Catholic" systematic theology perspective, for, as Alison Milbank (2020:18) points out Christians do not live outside of God and God's life but rather inside the eternal overflow of God's love. Theologically this is termed participation and, while there is much more to be said on the subject (Davison, 2019) it does further underline that human agency in mission is likely limited to "getting ourselves out of the way" of God, as we shall see rather than thinking that it is still somehow down to us and our singular effort to "join in".

Reception of the *missio Dei* has been rather slow on the ground and not uncontested in the academy, yet it is beginning to filter through to church bodies and particular worshipping communities and as such is now shaping their imaginations and behaviours (Clark et al., 2010). Even on the ground however there is new evidence emerging that it is openly resisted and brings conflict and contestation (Hardy, 2022). For me this is more evidence for the spiritual nature of the task of participating in the mission of God – it goes very deep into the church's core beliefs and practices. I have written elsewhere of six practical and behavioural shifts that are illustrative of the church turning inside out in this way (Carson et al., 2021: 101–15). Some practitioners and scholars have called this movement the *missional* church, where the missional is about the formation of Christian community around God's mission in the world – though the term is not without its difficulty and contestation too. The key word here is *formation.* Missional church is about how the "doing" of the church is wholly derived from its prior "being". The being of a missional church is focused on how God calls, gathers, centres and sends it into God's world to participate in God's mission there. Ultimately therefore becoming a missional church is first and foremost a *spiritual* task. There are two ways to understand this better.

First, following Williams (2020), we can state that mission arises from a life of prayer with the emphasis in that prayer on the mutual gaze between lover and the beloved. Such a stance removes anxiety (at least about the big picture of how God holds all things, including a declining church) and leads Christians naturally into mission:

> Mission is an invitation to live in a new world. It is not recruiting people for a manifesto or a programme … just as prayer, serious prayer, seems to begin in looking in wonder, in the gaze of astonishment, so with mission. What is this new world where things are so different? What is this new world where depths we hadn't imagined are uncovered and made visible? (Williams, 2020:14-15)

Another way of looking at this is that if local churches are to adopt the *missio Dei* as a way of being, the core skill, or in biblical terms gift, involved in "finding out what God is doing" is that of *discernment.* We might think of discernment alternatively as "paying attention", being able to notice, to see – as Jesus demonstrates to the religious leaders of his day in John 9. Discernment is also clearly a spiritual task, one which too is grounded in prayer.

This article works towards presenting a rather hidden and forgotten stream of Christian spirituality which is directly connected to the ability to pay attention in the *here and now* of any moment and arises from contemplative or mystical prayer in silence. It is supported by the long Christian tradition, stretching back to the Desert Mothers and Fathers of the fourth century onwards, of the apophatic way or *via negativa* where words for God and in prayer run out in the face of the One who simply is. Somehow the ability to remain present to God in silence is directly related to the ability to notice the presence and activity of God at any other time and therefore participate in the new world that God's presence and activity is always creating. In the biblical and Christian traditions there is a rather forgotten way of "paying attention" that is grounded in the "paradox of intention", and draws on this negative or apophatic stance which states that trying to reach God can only be done so by letting go of the intention to do so. Perhaps this is also the case in mission – if we engage in mission in an anxious, even frantic desire for results we are most likely to be disappointed. In order to understand more how a recovery of the apophatic might work for us in creating missional churches we turn to neuroscientific research on the human brain.

The right and left brains – "The Master and his Emissary"

Research into the functioning of the human brain has been magisterially presented by Iain McGilchrist (2018 [2009]).[3] McGilchrist is somewhat of a polymath in that he works at a high level across many disciplines which include neuroscience, psychiatry, psychology, philosophy and even the occasional excursion into theology. In doing so he models for the reader what he is explicating which, to do a great injustice to the book of nearly 600 pages (of which more than 100 are notes and bibliography), states that the human brain is divided into quite distinct left and right hemispheres. It is not that left and right hemispheres *do* different things, as scientific studies have shown that most brain functions occur in both hemispheres. Rather they have distinct, what I would call epistemic functions which are related to the evolution of animal brains from birds. Birds need to pay close attention to small specks of food (left brain) and have a bigger, even whole or rounded picture of the world around them that contains predators, others in the flock and potential mates (right brain) (2018 [2009]: 27). The two halves need to be kept largely separate in how they *attend* to the world and this has remained pretty much the case throughout the course of evolution. However, there is, it seems, particularly in humans, an optimal relationship between the left and right brains for flourishing which is constantly under threat because of the way the left hemisphere operates.

McGilchrist (2018 [2009]: 14) employs a metaphorical fable from Nietzsche to convey the precarity of the relationship and hence the title of his book. A good and benevolent leader (the "Master") is inevitably effective at growing his influence over lands and requires representatives (the "Emissary") in the burgeoning fiefdom to see to the day to day work. Equally inevitably one day an Emissary realizes they do not need the Master and attempts a hostile takeover. Both are required but their relationship has to remain asymmetrical for life to continue to flourish across the lands. Thus, McGilchrist sets himself

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3 While not uncontroversial, McGilchrist's work has continued with a further massive two-volume extension of his thinking published in 2021 as *The Matter with Things*. These volumes contain, amongst other things, a first principles argument for the existence of the sacred in the universe. Critiques of McGilchrist tend to revolve around accusing him of a supposed right-brain tautology which cannot be argued against. Such critique ends up, in my view, also being tautologous. What is without doubt is the increasing acclaim for his work, witnessed by his keynote speech at the AI World Summit 2022 – see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XgbUCKWCMPA accessed 9 November 2022.

the double task of showing how the different brains offer different qualities of attention or "seeing" of the world. He demonstrates how the left brain has tended over the course of (at least) Western history to dominate – resulting in its current virtual hegemony in the post-modern period. Understanding the importance of defining what attention is, is vital here – it "is a *way in which,* not a thing: it is intrinsically a relationship, not a brute fact. It is a "howness", a something between" (2018 [2009]:29, italics original).

The differences in how the divided brain pays attention are key to understanding McGilchrist's argument. They have a double effect in that they not only change how we see the world, but they also affect the world itself (2018 [2009]: 5) – the nature of how we see reality and even truth. The left brain *divides* and categorizes, it objectifies the world, sees things without relation to each other, only as separate entities; it reaches out to grasp the world, take power and rule over it; things have utility for the left brain whether they are animate or inanimate. The right brain on the other hand sees from the whole, understands all things as connected, allows things to simply be what they are and attends to the in-betweenness of the self and any Other with which it is in relationship. It is not difficult to comprehend, then, that the ability for much of what happens in spirituality, and particularly apophatic contemplation, resides in the right-hemisphere brain. Nevertheless, left-brain "linearity" has predominated over the past few centuries, thus marginalizing the gifts that mystical work can bring. McGilchrist's work has been picked up by Christian thinkers and writers over the past decade or so and I wish to introduce here at least two approaches spirituality and missional church life that arise from this new understanding of how our brains pay attention.

AMERICAN EVANGELICAL NEUROTHEOLOGY AND PRACTICE

First a group of American Evangelicals[4] draw deeply on McGilchrist and other neuroscientific sources as well as the American philosopher and Christian author Dallas Willard. They develop a renewed understanding of discipleship and Christian formation (for example Wilder, 2020 and Wilder & Hendricks, 2020). These works are related to the relatively new field of "neurotheology"

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4 It turns out, perhaps not unsurprisingly, that all these writers are male, which I note does skew my bibliography somewhat.

with authors crossing over from medical neuroscience into theology and spirituality such as Curt Thompson (2010) and Andrew Newberg (2016 [2010], 2018).

Let us examine more deeply the work of Wilder and Hendricks, who are indeed concerned with Christian character formation, maturity and discipleship in community, especially when, in their experience, spiritual "growth" seems to plateau and even become very stuck after an initial burst of energy and light.

Wilder and Hendricks locate the most fruitful possibilities for character formation in the right brain since this is where, as we have seen, relationality to the other is attended to (2020: 22). They also point out that much of the function of the right brain is "preconscious" (2020: 21) and therefore not susceptible to cognitive training which is how much discipleship formation in the church proceeds. This is important since it leads directly to the employment of spiritual practices in relational community for growth. Spiritual practices are habit forming over time and shift behaviour in much more subtle ways. The argument goes something like this.

Character formation arises out of "loving attachment to Jesus" (2020: 41), which makes theological sense in the light of the summary of the Law which is to love God and neighbour (Mark 12:29-31). The emphasis in the Christian life is therefore placed upon "attachment love" or *hesed* in the Hebrew Bible and *agape* in the New Testament. From such attachment arises relational joy which is described as "what we feel when we are with someone who is happy to be with us" (2020: 56) and which again is located in right brain attention. Such notions are clearly related to how we learn healthy or secure attachment in infancy following the child psychologists Winnicott and Bowlby (for example see Winnicott, 1991 [1971]). Such is the strength of belief here in attachment joy that it even leads the authors to overturn that Evangelical shibboleth of the division between the first and second persons of the Trinity on the Cross as Jesus dies which plays out in many contemporary hymns and worship songs. Rather the authors claim that Jesus "never lost touch of His Father's face shining on Him as He was tortured and humiliated" (2020: 60, capitals in the original). Character is formed by focusing on increasing the capacity of the Christian community to exhibit *hesed* and joy by "training" the right brains of members with various exercises (2020: 187ff.).

In another suggestive development such joyful attachment allows a phenomenon Jim Wilder names "mutual mind" or intersubjectivity as occurring via the right brain between people (Wilder, 2020: 33). I suspect this is related to Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's (2002 [1992]) concept of "flow" in the positive

psychology movement's study of happiness, which is not unrelated to the theology of joy we are discussing here and Polanyi's notion of "tacit knowledge" (Wilder, 2020: 40). All of which raises the possibility of finding a mutual mind with God which further results in the joy and peace of being seen by the divine (2020: 49).

Wilder connects with the practice of mindfulness (2020: 37) as a precursor to prayerful attachment with God which is helpful, but perhaps because of a fear of meditative practice that does not sit before an Other (2020: 38) he will not lean into contemplative prayer or any sense of the apophatic. He seems largely unaware of the paradox of intention which we referred to above and the "*nada*" or "nothing" on the ascent of Mt Carmel in the writings of St John of the Cross.

What we might call the Wilder school introduces fruitful spiritual practices designed to "train" the right brain in order to grow joy and character, which Mike Harrison has explicated helpfully (2022). Yet I cannot help but feeling, especially after finishing the *The Other Half of Church* that Christian discipleship for Wilder and his colleagues remains a programme based on a certain kind of (even gendered) activism which could lead to ultimate disappointment under the paradox of intention. The practices recommended in these books largely remain cataphatic and therefore do not go quite far enough for me. I wonder whether the left brain emissary has asserted itself and gained the upper hand once more. I believe we must turn to the apophatic in order to actually find the wholeness that Wilder and his like are seeking.

The right brain, apophatic "beholding" and the missional church

Therefore, we turn to Maggie Ross, an American Anglican solitary based in Oxford, and her two-volume work on silence (2014, 2018). Ross almost joyously utilises McGilchrist to make a claim about how the suspicion and even loss of the apophatic in western spirituality is directly related to the hegemony of left brain attention. Ross engages with McGilchrist's understanding of the epistemic difference in how the two halves of the brain function from the very start. She offers a schematic diagram (2014: 36-7) for this in relation to her definition of contemplation as "a specific disposition of attentive and responsive receptivity" (2014: 75) in the Christian tradition. There is a sense in which apophatic practice has always employed the human right brain – it is simply that now, from neuroscience via McGilchrist, we have the evidence for it.

It is worth noting here that silence in apophatic prayer is not the technical absence of sound, but a disposition in the one who prays to be solely present, without distraction, to God who is ultimately unknowable. I would suggest this is a simple, yet highly nuanced approach to Wilder et al.'s understanding of attachment to God. Ross' schematic shows the proper relationship between left ("Self-conscious Mind") and right brain ("Deep Mind") attentiveness for optimal functioning. Ross summarizes this relationship thus:

> Most people [*we might say Western people*] are trapped in the virtual and noisy world of self-consciousness (left side of diagram). For the mind to function optimally, it must be recentred in the deep mind (right side), restoring circulation between the two epistemologies so that ordinary life draws on its wellspring of silence and transfiguration. Then experience is understood as provisional and is continually submitted to silence where it is transfigured. (2014: 36)

The self-conscious mind on the left side of the diagram is "governed by the paradox of intention" which Ross believes is the key to undermining its hegemony. The deep mind can be accessed only by apophasis which describes by double negation in unknowing, "it is not that, and it is not even not that" (2014: 69) thus coming to know God, whose centre is everywhere and circumference is nowhere. In the middle of the two kinds of mind is a liminal in-betweenness where the connectivity happens. The first two "threshold/effects/phenomena" noted here are attentive receptivity and beholding, which are no doubt connected to Wilder's attachment love, as we noted above.

Before we continue, a note about the use of the word "experience". Ross, along with much of the Christian tradition, is very wary of speaking of (or in fact having) "spiritual experiences". This is not to deny that they happen or cannot draw us closer to God, but the simple truth is that any experience is we have is ours and therefore by definition cannot be God. As Ross states in relationship to the master of the deep mind or right brain, in contrast to the self-conscious emissary of the left brain, "when self-consciousness is suspended there can be no experience" (Ross, 2014: 78). Here is another departure from the Wilder school. Newberg (2018: 259-78) has a chapter entitled "Escaping the prison of the brain: Mysticism" which addresses throughout so-called mystical experiences. Newberg seems unaware of any critique of experience in the context of spirituality which drives what I would understand as a non-question about whether we can escape our brains. Our brains are a given, as is God; what is

simple but profound is the space between them when placed in proximity in silent prayer.

Ross devotes a whole chapter in her second book to beholding (2018: 128-36). Ross thinks that the word behold is "arguably the most important word in the Bible" (2018: 129). It is the first word God speaks to Adam (Gen. 1:29) and the last word Jesus gives to the disciples (Mt. 28:20) and occurs over 1,300 times (2018: 132). However, many more recent translations elide the meaning to "remember", "see" and "know" thus offering more evidence for the dominance of left-brain attentiveness in modernity.

In beholding Ross states that again the paradox of intention applies – it cannot be made to happen. Etymologically it is related to grasping ("getting it", we might say, or having a "light bulb" moment) thus, "one *holds* or *grasps* by *un*grasping: in beholding the analytic conceptualizing faculty is relinquished" (2018: 129, italics in the original). Here is yet another departure from Wilder, since while we are not far from "mutual mind" here, in fact there may even be an equivalence, Ross would understand such moments as gifts to be noticed rather trained for and sought out. I suggest there is a connection here with the practice of *visio Divina.* If *lectio Divina* is reading the inspired text along with God, *visio Divina* is seeing or perhaps better, imagining the world as God's creation along with or even as God sees it. This takes us directly to the development of the imagination through poetics, music and art.

Beholding is a "covenant" word and the beholder therefore, "faces outward, self-forgetful, engaged, and contiguous with the community of the beheld; beholding is receptivity and engagement" (2018: 130). I don't know of a better description of a missional stance from within the people of God, the church, not least because "beholding is a living, ongoing recapitulation of the self-emptying en-Christing process of Philippians 2:5-11" (2018: 133). It is also a public act which stands over against the privatisation of religion in modernity (see also Chatfield and Rooms, 2019: 163). Elsewhere Ross writes of the importance of understanding the Christ hymn as encapsulating incarnation, transfiguration and resurrection where trans-figuration is exactly what happens when the deep mind becomes involved in beholding. With beholding a new set of possibilities erupts in the *here and now.* What happens is a "shift of perspective, turning inside-out and upside-down" (2018: 134). And here we return to where we started with Rowan Williams' definition of mission as discovering the possibility of a different world.

THE UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES OF SEEKING GOD IN SILENCE AND THE MISSIONAL CHURCH

At this juncture, as we conclude the article, I want to bring together the threads of what we have been learning. That is, what is the effect, or the fruit, of utilizing our God-given right-brain way of attending to its full capacity and engaging our Deep Mind through the apophatic practice of silence in relation to the mission of God? We need to delineate its consequences and ask how those effects are helpful in missional churches alongside what might be done to enhance the practice of silence. But before we do that some caveats are in order. First let the reader not take away from this work that the cataphatic and cataphatic ways of praying are of little use. What we are about here is a re-ordering of how the two halves of the brain function, rather than advocating for some equally awful binary opposition of left and right. Second, silence in the whole sweep of Christian history comes in various forms some of which are deeply antithetical to the purposes of God in the world as Diarmaid MacCulloch has wisely demonstrated (2013). Silence in the face of evil, especially when perpetrated by the Church, is not what we are engaging with here. And finally, we have to remember the advice given by Abba Moses to a new hesychast entering the desert to pray, "Go, sit in your cell, and your cell will teach you everything" (Ward, 1975: 139). That is, it is the repeated and habitual entry into silence, which is enough in all its utter simplicity, difficulty and ultimate profundity, that is required. The English mystic text *The Cloud of Unknowing* (2001) calls this a "naked intent towards God". Given the paradox of intention which is ever at work in seeking after God, God's presence and activity, fruitfulness emerges properly as an unintended consequence of the practice of silence. The practice is both an end in itself and a means to an end since it has a deep and lasting effect.

Let us then gather together some of these unintended consequences. We can work here with Ross and place alongside her the descriptions of the effects of a deliberate entering into silence by Sara Maitland (2008) when she took herself off to live alone in a remote place. I think it helps here that Maitland does not become a silent recluse for overtly Christian purposes (e.g. as part of any religious community), thus she is able to describe what happens in her with reference to a whole range of other sources. Her work is a properly interdisciplinary, even, we might say, secular and scientific examination of the subject. Perhaps it combines her right and left brain in helpful sequence.

Seeking silence is by definition an embodied practice, as Ross says, "The mind's work with silence and its effects involve the entire bodied person" (2014: 45). Maitland notes the "extraordinary intensification of physical sensation"

(2008: 48) with all her senses and feelings become more available to her. Such intensification occurs in the *here and now.* Silence before God is about being present in the moment, on the theological principle that God is always where we are, not where we imagine we ought to be (usually in some self-conscious nostalgic past or idealised future). Presence to the reality of the here and now alongside embodiment are vital signs of the members of a missional church. They are able to be the change they wish to be, fulfilling Newbigin's description of the local church as the hermeneutic of the gospel, being God's people who "believe it and live by it" (1989: 227).

Maitland notes what she calls "disinhibition" arising quickly in her new silent state (2008: 52) and she relates this to a lack of self-consciousness (in Ross' terms the left brain is losing its hegemony) and in Jungian terms having the *persona,* or with Freud, the superego taken away. Such disinhibition can go in several directions, but when placed in a theological frame I am drawn back once again to the Christ hymn in Philippians and the *kenosis* of the Christ which Ross noted was also directly related to the gift of beholding. I once heard (I forget the exact moment) Bishop Gordon Mursell, then Bishop of Stafford in the Church of England, call this phenomenon being "unselfed". An important distinction needs to be made here since Ross thinks it is very dangerous to speak of the destruction of the self. Rather by self-forgetfulness which arises in silence the "me" that gets in way of God can be "parked" as I sometimes put it, or laid aside so that, in Ross' terms again – transfiguration of the whole of us can happen. Another way of putting this according Bishop Wolfgang Huber, is "free, creative self-withdrawal" (quoted in Keifert & Rooms, 2014: 14). As corporate bodies missional churches have raised levels of good conflict since something vital is happening and there will always be resistance to such new life (Keifert & Rooms, 2014: 15). This heightened conflict can only be dealt with if enough members have learnt how to lay aside their own self-conscious desires, and stay silent until they can speak from their innermost hearts where God resides. In my work of consulting to churches we call this a "floated conversation" as part of corporate spiritual discernment. It is truly beautiful when it happens, as it ebbs and flows with the movement of the Spirit.

We have noted the predominance of anxiety in the contemporary church which reduces its capacity to deal with the very things it is anxious about – a vicious circle. Whereas being before God in silence is the antidote to that anxiety. In silence we become connected to the "ground of all being" which in turn grounds us and develops in us, from Family Systems Theory what can be termed a "God-centred self-definition" (Rooms and Keifert, 2019: 15). Self-definition in God is what allows us to focus on God's presence and activity

and not be distracted from it by fighting or fleeing from those resisting it. And the result of that state of being is the opposite of anxiety; joy. Here we are in full agreement with the Wilder school. Two of Maitland's reflections are based around the emergence of joy during silence (2008: 62, 74) and we have already referred to Harrison's work on the subject (2022). I would add here that fun is part of, if not limited to being joyful. This has been my experience of people who are liberated from anxious church activity into having fun, finding out what God is up to and joyously taking part.

While Maitland does not specifically refer to a heightened sense of sight, we did hear of other senses being enhanced and we might extend that to seeing. We have already referred to the possibility of *visio Divina.* According to Ross this is because silence leads to *transfiguration* (rather than transformation, which she dislikes as it implies a change of being) and the subsequent "beholding" which changes our perception of reality (Ross, 2014: 98). The result of such transfiguration is a new openness and receptivity to the other which welcomes the receiving of hospitality (Keifert & Rooms, 2014: 16-19) and a reversal of the inherited one-way flow of church (Barrett, 2020).

Given its efficacy, therefore as we have demonstrated here, how might an emphasis on practicing silence and the apophatic be integrated into the life of churches? The individual and corporate seeking of silence both in private prayer by some (I don't believe this needs to be for absolutely everyone, though I would recommend it for leaders however they come to it as there are many paths) and public worship, as we have demonstrated will de-centre the "selves" of the membership over time.

At least two practical suggestions flow from this, though space limits other suggestions. Ross has created and road-tested a "contemplative Eucharist" (2018: 100-27) which can take up to four or five hours since it includes long periods of silence. This is not to be a very regular occurrence but one can see how it would create the conditions for intentional silence in weekly or even daily public worship. In fact, if a church's regular worship does not contain periods of silence longer than a few seconds, its missional engagement may be seriously lacking. That is, if a corporate body of Christians cannot hold silence together for any significant length of time they are unlikely to be able to last long on a journey to be missional. The spiritual practices that become habits in missional churches (Keifert & Rooms, 2014) contain the possibility for learning to be silent in community. Other specific, intentional groups gather for just this

purpose such as the Julian Meeting and the World Community for Christian Meditation.[5]

Further, if there are to be Christians exploring apophatic prayer they are going to need support from good spiritual directors. I referred in the introduction to my practical theology treatment of spiritual direction (Chatfield and Rooms, 2019) and, as sometimes happens when writing I realized there is a connection between the discernment that occurs in spiritual direction and the corporate discernment of the *missio Dei* in missional churches. Indeed, one might be a "fractal" or microcosm of the other – they are the same shape and only differ in scale. In fact, missional church may simply be spiritual direction scaled up (2019: 162).

Conclusion

I have long believed that the Christ hymn in Philippians describes the shape of Christian discipleship (e.g. Chatfield and Rooms, 2019: 72) and mission for both the individual and the church. The depths of the cross that we are called to take up in discipleship (Mark 8:34) cannot be plumbed without apophasis, without engagement with the practice of silence, without the gift of beholding which arises from within that very silence. We have to give up our anxious activity, embrace our vulnerabilities, even looking the "death" of the Church in the face, if we are to find resurrection. If we attend to God's presence and activity, the *missio Dei* in the world in this way, waiting for the surprises that beholding bestows upon us we have a new missional future and world that we can live into and embody.

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5 See https://thejulianmeetings.net/ and https://wccm.org accessed 9 November 2022.

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Surfing with the Spirit or sinking into the sea? Elements enabling Christian character formation in a post-Christendom culture

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Abstract

This essay focuses on that dimension of sharing in the *missio Dei* individually and corporately which involves the formation of Christian character. In particular what should be our first considerations when seeking character formation for participation in the *missio Dei*? This article will suggest that our attention initially should be focused elsewhere than behaviour or direct attempts to change character. Further, while Aristotelian approaches are particularly popular in the contemporary (especially secular) literature, this essay considers the significance of dimensions of *Christian* character formation which are often

underplayed by such approaches, not least loving attachment relationship to the divine and accountability-in-community. While space precludes an exhaustive account of influences on Christian character development, the essay considers aspects of experiencing Christ-centred community in shaping Christian character, utilizing recent insights from the field of neuroscience. It concludes with an example taken from an Anglo-catholic setting of how eucharistic worship can contribute to the formation of Christian character and thus of sharing in the *missio Dei.*

Keywords: Christian character formation; Christian spirituality; Church; Eucharist; *Missio Dei*; Neuroscience

Introduction

The New Testament is full of descriptions and injunctions relating to Christian character formation (such as Mt. 5-7, Gal. 5, Eph. 4, Phil. 4, Col. 3) stating the telos in various (related) ways, be it "following Christ", "putting on Christ", being "conformed to the image of his Son" or through other expressions. Such formation is about sharing in the person and way of Jesus Christ and being caught up in the movement of God in Jesus Christ towards the world – and thus it is about participating in the *missio Dei.* As such one significant dimension of individuals and Christian communities being caught up in the *missio Dei* is *through* genuine Christian character formation. Attention will be paid in this paper to how engagement in the *missio Dei* through Christian character formation is realized through experiencing community centred on Christ, utilizing in particular recent insights from neuroscience.

To define terms here: "character" here is understood to be that "settled pattern of will, thought, feeling and bodily actions that reflect what we have become as a result of how we have habitually lived our lives" (Copan, 2016: 207). "Formation" is about shaping our wills, thoughts, feelings and bodily actions in particular and regularly habitual ways. *Missio Dei* is understood as a sharing in God's purposes in the world as embodied by Jesus Christ in his teaching, life, death and resurrection. This "sharing" or participation includes, yet goes beyond, that participation by which we continually receive our being from God in a manner appropriate to our humanity. It also means (following Davison, 2019: 35) a realization of Christlikeness insofar as we receive this aright – a receiving which is God's gift giving us capacity and receptivity so to do. Consequently our sharing in the *missio Dei* includes developing Christlike

character, that settled pattern of will, thought, feeling and bodily actions reflecting that which is perfectly embodied in Christ.

The wider conversation around character formation has been informed by recent high-profile moral derelictions of duty. For example, in England, organizations such as the Police have underlined how mere instruction in moral values or institutional norms fails to deliver the moral behaviour required of those in positions of authority. Small wonder then that initiatives such as the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues at Birmingham University and the Oxford Character Project have sprung up to research and enable character development in different professional fields.

These and other recent initiatives are strongly influenced by Aristotelian approaches. They emphasis attractions including human telos as "happiness", human flourishing with virtue as its own reward and human agency in forming character. They incorporate a sense of how virtues are caught, taught and sought, virtues as dispositional clusters involving perception, motivation, behaviour, desire and emotion, practical wisdom's significance in virtuous behaviour, the non-necessity of any religious belief system and the influence of affect, situational variables and community.

Yet curiously Hauerwas (1995: xiv), Arthur (2021: 3) and others note a lack of progress in this Aristotelian approach to character formation. Perhaps the lack of progress relates to hesitancy about "imposing" values threatening such sacred cows as "autonomy" and "freedom". Or perhaps there is little consensus on what is human good. Freedom or happiness are popular candidates but both provide little moral content or practical guidance for the shaping of our characters. Our post-Kantian Western world has arguably reduced our sense of self to one whose only action is to "choose" and who at core has no telos, virtues, vices, practices, communities, emotions, story, authority *or* character; indeed unrecognizable to our ancestors.

One can also see potential issues with Aristotelian approaches from a Christian perspective. These issues include the stress on self-sufficiency, self-development and self-mastery. Further issues revolve around a neglect of virtues like humility, compassion and justice for the poor; the absence of the Christian virtues of faith and hope and love, along with the absence of divine activity or its inspiration. Intellectual capacity and human agency are elevated above all other capacities. There is evidence of problematic views on women and slavery and eudaimonia, with related concepts like flourishing and fruitfulness easily sliding into cultural ideals of success and the presumed "objective" universality of core virtues.

Aquinas and other theologians have built judiciously on Aristotle's approach, understanding Christian virtue to be not so much what humans achieve but what God grows within us. However while human will-power and determination are engaged rather than bypassed, nevertheless this approach depends on the transforming power of God's grace, God being virtue's prime agent, exemplar and end.[1] In contrast to secular notions of making our own character the account here more readily speaks of being formed in relation to God in Christ in such a way that God's character in Christ comes through (e.g. Gal. 2.20).

Recent work in the field of positive psychology and human flourishing also connects with character development. In the field of neuroscience McGilchrist (2019) points out how the right hemisphere of the brain operates faster than the left hemisphere and is responsible for producing reactions to circumstances *before* we have a chance to consider how to react. Hence the right hemisphere is a leading source of our character, in that our reactions reveal the "natural", "settled" or "characteristic" way of being and responding. Thus character formation involves the challenge of accessing the right hemisphere, through for example the body, imagination and affective relationships. Such insights suggest ways of going beyond Hauerwas and others in considering how Christian practices access the right brain's character settings and thus shape Christlike character in ways enabling participation in the *missio Dei*.

Christianity in its scriptures and ecclesial life has consistently underlined the significance of character formation in following Jesus' way and teaching. Furthermore there are a number of areas essential to Christian character formation including encountering God in Christ, experiencing community centred on Christ and individual and corporate following of Jesus' teaching and way. Hence this paper will utilize recent insights from neuroscience to examine how engagement in the *missio Dei* through Christian character formation can be realized through experiencing community centred on Christ.

Encountering God in Christ

Foundational to character formation are our loving attachments, a truth attested to by theologians and neuroscientists alike. Examples such as the Life

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1 See e.g. Herdt, 2008: 89 and passim for a perceptive discussion of Aquinas' infused virtues.

Model (Friesan et al., 1999) offer a relational theological foundation promoting attachment with God and human persons as a key component of spiritual and psychological change. Contemporary neurobiological models support loving attachment as the mechanism for maturity development and healthy interpersonal skills (Schore, 1994). Such attachment has a significant research base in terms of its importance in childhood development adult relationships and indeed attachment with God (see Wilder, Garzon & Johnson, 2020 for an overview). Fundamental to Jesus Christ's character is his relation with his Father, that loving attachment affirmed at baptism and on the Mount of Transfiguration and elsewhere in the New Testament. Thus participating in the *missio Dei* as defined above includes growing this loving attachment. Benner (2003: 88) writes that "meditating on God's love has done more to increase my love than decades of effort to try to be more loving" and effecting changes Benner had given up hope of realizing. This is unsurprising from the perspective of neuroscience. Jennings (2013: 234) observed that

> meditating specifically on God's love increases growth in the prefrontal cortex (where we make judgements and experience Godlike love) and thus increased compassion, empathy, altruism AND also increased sharp thinking and memory – ie it stimulates the brain to heal and grow itself as we worship a God of love.

However as any seasoned preacher or pastor knows it is not enough simply to assert God's love for us in a propositional way. Such propositional statements are not necessarily *appropriated*. Indeed it is not apparent that there is always an abiding awareness of God's deep love even among Christian leaders. Gerald May calls the sort of knowing of love that is essential for transformation "contemplative knowing". This knowing of love results from meeting God in a contemplative state (May, 1982: 135). Benner (2003: 76) in a more Ignatian key writes:

> It comes from sitting at the feet of Jesus, gazing into his face and listening to his assurances of love for me. It comes from letting God's love wash over me, not simply trying to believe it. It comes from soaking in the scriptural assurances of such love, not simply reading them and trying to remember or believe them. It comes from spending time with God, observing how He looks at me. It comes from watching his watchfulness over me and listening to his protestations of love for me.

In a different vein Maggie Ross ponders the *creatio continua* in a way designed to deepen awareness. She gratefully receives these wonders as loving, personal gifts (Ross, 2018: 119).

What Ross, May and Benner are describing here are ways of deepening an attachment relationship of love with God, conscious of how such relationships are critical to shaping behaviour and transformation. Such insights are not new. Khouri (2021: 67-8) suggests that how we attach to God and others has more influence over the formation of character than anything else. Khouri notes that the brain first receives information via that part of our brain that focuses on attachment before continuing to our emotional and identity centres. This means that who and what we are most closely attached to shapes how we process and respond to sensory information (Khouri, 2021: 157). After leaving our attachment centres, the sensory information passes to our alarm and emotional centres (generating awareness of dangers and feelings about incoming data) and thence to our identity centre. This helps us work out how to respond, consistent with "who I am" and "who my people are". All of which takes just one sixth of a second and happens faster than most conscious thought. (Only then do we find the region of our brain responsible for logic and reason employed.)

These connections between neuroscience and emotional processing underline that a crucial dimension of character formation is a loving attachment relationship with God. Critical to this is grasping, heart and soul, God's loving attachment to us. Wilder, Khouri and others understand such attachment as beginning with grace. Grace is not simply the accurate but dry description of "unmerited favour" but, more affectively, "the God-given gift of intended, unearned relationship with him as his special and favourite son or daughter" (Khouri, 2021: 12).[2] Fostering this attachment requires imagination and affect as much as cognition, a growing awareness that one is "'the sparkle of joy in God's eye" for example.

A homely example comes from Marlena Graves whose three-year-old child caught Marlena looking at her admiringly and with great affection and so asked "Mommy, why looking at me like that?" Marlena replied "Because I love you and delight in you." Marlena then added "God looks at you that way too." Her curiosity piqued, the three year old said "You mean God looks happy at me?" "Yes" said Marlena, "God always looks happy at you!" The three-year-old

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2 Favourite here does not imply exclusivity or superiority here as God's relational grace is not competitive.

paused and then replied "Then I look happy at God, at you, at Daddy, at sisters" (Graves, 2020: 75).

More widely, research on character formation shows benevolent loving service being rooted primarily in grasping God's love personally. Lee et al. (2013: 21) revealed that "our single most important finding is the extent to which experiences of divine love are related to a life of benevolent service". Such research accords with Aristotle's view that affect and emotion influence the shaping of virtuous character. The research also accords with Wesley's view that encountering God's pardoning love personally creates the possibility of a responsive heart delighting to love God and our neighbour with peace and joy.

If developing loving attachments is critical for character formation how do we foster such loving attachments in ecclesial community? Preaching and teaching is certainly part of it, but there are plenty of people who have received teaching on God's love without personally appropriating it. The neuroscientist and psychiatrist Curt Thompson (2021) suggests that, analogous to a child's growing loving attachments, all persons need four elements in place to grow loving attachment to God – being safe, seen, soothed and secure.

Space precludes a description of each of these elements but closer examination of being seen provides a helpful example. The process of being seen, emphasizing the benign and compassionate gaze of the divine through liturgy, prayer and daily life can help hugely. Thompson suggests *face-to-face* meditation where one appreciates the face of God shining upon you communicating "You are my son/daughter whom I love. I am so pleased with you that you are on earth." All the while one is invited to sense God's eyes looking directly, to not look away as you imagine God speaking these words. This is followed by remaining emotionally and imaginatively still for a few minutes, reflecting on one's feelings and God's feelings. Thompson (2010: 143-4) argues that over a period of weeks, with consistency and repetition, this will change the practitioner's neural networks, echoing similar experiences in scripture.

Among other practices there is also the apophatic and contemplative dimension of attentiveness which fosters attachment relationship with God. This attentiveness is not about doing or having but being before God, renouncing the idolatry of human agency, refusing that clinging and grasping rooted often in egoic fear and that presumption we can manipulate God by method. The paradox of intention is to the fore here. We shape character by relinquishing the activity of so doing and by simply attending in the presence of God. Writing of this paradox, Shaw (1988: 202) says, "Something else acts, and I am to be attentive. My action thus participates in a larger vitality in which my life is embedded … life is embedded in a larger sustaining whole, and yieldedness to

this, participation within it, is the fulfilment of human existence." Ross (2014: 35) argues that such meditative practice (alongside other practices) enables access to character settings in the brain, what she refers to as "deep mind", "and intent is supremely important in this process, for meditation accesses the deep mind and the attention of the deep mind is influenced by intention".

Specifically in terms of character formation, the time of silence and still-ness is not itself primarily understood theologically as our work or activity. Nevertheless the framing of such practice as intentionally seeking to be in the presence of the self-giving love of the Trinity (unlike vipassana for instance), basking like sunbathers in the love of God, being irradiated with the light of God's love (as Ross puts it elsewhere) can contribute to the shaping of Christian character.

TELL ME THE OLD, OLD STORY

The story that the ecclesial community is living and communicating is also critical for character formation. Hauerwas (1981: 116) points out that the development of character happens in the context of a community shaped by a narrative. Or as MacIntyre (1981: 216) observed, it is only possible to "answer the question 'What am I to do?' if I can answer the prior question 'Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?'" The difficulty with Hauerwas' position is, however, as Gill (1999: 14) points out, is that Hauerwas' later work so dis-tinguishes Christian communities from worldly secularity as not to notice the overlaps and influences of Christian and "secular" narratives. This makes for an unhelpful idealizing of churches which Fergusson (1998: 66) sharply observes exists nowhere else.

Nevertheless the Christian narrative has plenty of examples of revelation involving realization of being part of quite a different story from the one you thought you were in. Examples include the Road to Emmaus, Peter's recommis-sioning and the conversion of Paul. What triggers the change in story here is often an experience whose intensity, clarity and significance gives an overarch-ing authority to aspects of the gospel story, transforming character. Part of the contemporary challenge is that it is not about exchanging a single story for a second single story in seemingly Hauerwasian mode but that

> for many of us, our work life, church life and family neighbor-hood life participate in fundamentally *different* narratives and are oriented toward different horizons … most of us remain divided

between competing narratives. In fact, this is one of the singular features of our pluralist, post-modern society: the loss of the meta-narrative. Each community and each person must construct meaning and identity as he or she sees fit. (Hagley, 2013)

What is needed is for the Christian narrative to have such authoritative influence on our patterns of will, thought and feeling that it brings a *coherence* to the multi-faceted narratives, practices and commitments by which we live and thus shapes Christian character.

'My people'

A key driver of such coherence is the strength of attachment to a particular people shaped by a specific narrative. Who "my people" are and how "my people" understand themselves narratively is highly significant in shaping character, making some ways of being and acting entirely straightforward and others beyond the pale. In his popular work *Atomic Habits* James Clear (2018: 116) points out that there are three groups of people whose habits we imitate – those close to us (our "tribe"), the many (the "crowd") and the powerful.

The influence of "my people" can be extraordinary. For example consider the twenty-one Christians led out to a Libyan beach by ISIS militants in 2015 who were then beheaded for being Christian. Western media focused on the horror of such savage and cold-blooded murder but not on the extraordinary fact that these twenty-one had not been passive but had audibly professed their faith in Jesus Christ just before and even during their decapitation.

Mosebach (2019) researched these men, twenty of whom were from the Egyptian Coptic Church. Villagers where the men's families lived told Mosebach that the men were not especially different from any other Christians in the village. The Coptic Church is a Church of martyrs and any of them in the village would rather die than betray the faith. The villagers added that their deaths didn't intimidate those left but gave Christians courage because the martyrs spending their last few moments alive in prayer proved the strength of their faith. There was no call for revenge from anyone, not only because Jesus' teaching was the primary authority here but also because the martyrs' witness simply outshone such darkness. The characters of those Coptic martyrs had been deeply shaped by the community to which they belonged, resulting in sacrifices that appeared largely unintelligible to Western media. Such witnesses'

brave witness to their faith embodied Christlike character unto death and thus is a startling participation in the *missio Dei* as defined above.

Who "my people" are can be deeply impactful in societies where there is persecution, segregation and ancestral continuity. In contrast, cultures that devalue the past and promote individualism invite a shallowness about "my people" that is less impactful on character. Wilder underlines the significance of "my people", arguing that "character is housed and remembered in the fast-track structures". For Wilder (2020: 42), the part of the brain which runs faster than conscious speed is managed by the right brain. Wilder points out that identity is a rather protected brain function and that access to establish or change identity and character is limited to those who are attached to us significantly; "the fast track only allows 'my people' access to the character settings" (Wilder, 2020: 43).

Accountability

Ecclesiologically this begs the question of how we might better enable Christian community to be about "'my people" shaping character. Recent decades have seen the development of ecclesial groups with different charisms. Examples like Neocatechumenate, Focolare, Sant'Egidio and some forms of New Monasticism have been more intentional about formation of "my people" together. The history of the Church shows that renewal has sometimes come through these initiatives, such as Wesley's Methodist class meeting and bands in eighteenth-century England. Relatedly, Wilder (2018: 23) notes churches in the West nowadays rarely see character transformation because of six specific reasons: they lose a group identity; focus on beliefs over relationships; misuse the power of shame and emotions; accept self-justifications; hide weakness; do not love enemies. The ecclesial initiatives just mentioned address such themes to lesser or greater extents.

There are no doubt dangers with developing an *ecclesiola in ecclesia* – the little church within the Church. These dangers include fracturing the Church, creating "levels" of discipleship and with it separation, splitting and sectarianism. Yet Jesus' own pedagogy with his disciples was that of a small group who travelled, ate and prayed together as a relationally close cohort and presumably Jesus was intentional about doing so to create the conditions for formation and (accountable) apprenticeship. Without accountability and a readiness to face the truth about ourselves through personal relationships we are vulnerable to self-delusion rather than transfiguration. Worse, we may be disregarding God's movement towards us and our participation in the *missio Dei*. The accountability

is in part about being freed by the gospel from the hell of Sisyphus-like labours of self-justification. We open ourselves together to God's healing as we exist in truthfulness, freedom and fearlessness which is able to be with others without rivalry, refusing to judge and calling ourselves to account.

Role models

Of particular significance among "my people" for character formation are those examples of Christian living whose way of being makes us (at our better moments) think "gosh, human beings can be like that in Christ, that is how I would like to be". Indeed, the Jubilee Centre for Character Development asserts that in an educational setting the single most important "tool" to impact a student's character is the teacher's own character (Arthur et al., 2017: 16). Role models deepen our understanding of Christian character, showing its promise, strangeness and attractiveness. Paas (2019: 193) points out that "the idea that everyone should have his or her unique high-quality experience of God is a product of modern consumer society rather than an authentic Christian thought". Rather God demonstrates Godself to the community of the Church and gives more light to some than others, for example "saints", Bible writers, apostles. This is why faith is and needs to be communal, so that individuals' experiences ensure communal upbuilding. As such "the first response to the giftings and testimony of others must not be envy or scepticism … but wonder: what is it God wants to tell us through this testimony?" (Paas, 2019: 194). And how are we being formed by it? Of course the idea of "exemplars" can invite a sense of hierarchy, superiority and self-regard. We need to care for ourselves and others to appreciate that genuine Christian exemplars are individuals who are ever more profoundly grasping the depth of their need for God, each with their own vulnerability to projections and delusions.

Brain skills, emotion and embodied cognition

Related to role models and exemplars and also foundational for character formation are what Coursey, Wilder and others describe as "brain skills". (This is a misnomer in some ways as such skills involve cognition, emotions and the body (including the brain) in their realization). "Brain skills" are relational skills that "equip us to effectively respond to the onslaught of shifting, moment-by-moment circumstances in the most efficient manner" (Coursey, 2016: 3). Such

skills shape our character as the skills become dispositions. An example is the skill of appreciation which leads to a grateful disposition. We learn brain skills as we grow, most particularly as infants. Gaps in brain skills can be transmitted through the generations. Acquiring skills requires interaction with more skilful brains, but only those with whom one has a positive emotional attachments. These skills will not spread without bonded relationships (and here joy is important as providing a bond). Once acquired, these skills need repeated practice to become ingrained habits. To develop these skills requires attachment love, a sense of "my people" and knowing how "my people" would act under conditions we experience. How "my people" act is the reference for our first reaction. These skills are not learned through reading but through repeated observation of those we are positively attached to who embody such skills. There are all sorts of such skills and Coursey counts nineteen brain skills which he argues build joyful community. While not specifically virtues these brain skills are essential to virtuous living and provide a good example of indirect but practical ways of taking forward character formation.

Take for example the skill of "returning to joy," which offers assurance that even when things go wrong, we are not abandoned and left in our upset. Returning to joy comes from strong attachments to others and a deep sense of who we are that will not get lost when we are in pain. This skill provides an emotional capacity enabling consistency and resilience under stress, enabling for example the love of enemies, patience, kindness. Consider for example six basic, unpleasant emotions of sadness, anger, disgust, shame, fear and despair. When we realize such emotions, are we able to return to joy straightforwardly? People who nurse their anger for days, weeks or even years, are clearly not. The longer it takes us to return to joy, the more emotionally exhausted we become. Parents who have not learned this skill cannot show their children how to properly manage and quiet big feelings. So a parent who cannot manage disgust for instance is changing a baby's nappy and receives the gift of some streaming diarrhoea. If the response is disgust then the baby's lip will begin to quiver, shame is initiated and crying follows. But a skilled parent stays connected, with interactive smiles and 'glad to be together' sounds, helping the baby learn "returning to joy" in relation to disgust. Staying connected when intense negative emotions kick in is critical and such connection enables the return to joy. For each of us there are particular emotions we need help with. We need to locate people who have the skill to return to joyful relationship from that emotion. We could also ask friends who have this skill to tell us stories about how they returned to joy.

This returning to joy involves a gratitude that is expressed in the midst of difficulties. Jesus in the midst of the apparent failure of people/towns hearing

his message actually gives thanks (Mt. 11.28-30). Again Jesus gives thanks at the last supper when facing abandonment by disciples and crucifixion. Or again, Jesus gives thanks to the Father in the sorrowful context of Lazarus' death before reviving him.

These skills are but one example of the wider field of embodied cognition and embodied emotion and how cognition, emotion and behaviour are intricately related to one another. Particularly relevant for our purposes is how the right brain, which as we have seen is the seat of character settings, makes possible "empathic connection, as well as understanding how others feel, what they mean not only by what they say in context … but by their facial expressions, their 'body language' and tone of voice" (McGilchrist, 2009: 66). Research continues to underline the significance of embodied cognition (Beilock, 2017). As Bourdieu (1990) says, "the body takes metaphors seriously" and our bodies are students even when we don't realize it. Recent studies go beyond Damasio (1994) and show the importance of emotion in understanding and working with behaviour. For example Johnson (2017) suggests all aspects of cognition are mediated, influenced or even initiated by emotion. The importance of emotion and its embodiment in understanding and working with cognition underlines the earlier points about the significance of loving attachments in shaping that settled pattern of will, thought, feeling and bodily actions that form character.

Thus Christian character formation through ecclesial community and conforming to Christ's teaching and way, which is a dimension of participation in the *missio Dei*, must pay attention to embodied cognition and enactive emotions. By and large, it seems we don't know and then act. Rather we know by acting, and our bodily habits affect what we do.

Examples: character formation in ecclesial community

The foregoing discussion suggests that the *first* questions we should be asking in regard to character formation for participation in the *missio Dei* are not so much "How do I improve my behaviour?" or "How do I change my character?" but rather "How am I practising my belovedness?", "Who are my people?" "To whom am I accountable?", "What is my/our story?", "To what am I paying attention?", "What (brain) skill needs attention?", "How am I forming character through bodily gestures and movements?" and "What is my body teaching me?"

Bodies matter and are places of formation and worship of one kind or another. While space precludes detailed consideration, one example is that of

liturgical formation, in which acts of sitting, kneeling or standing, whether it is eating bread and wine, crossing ourselves or waving palm branches occur through our bodies. Another example is Benson's Christ's pieces, an intentional Christian community in Brisbane, Australia, which takes the bodily processes of habit formation seriously and registers the interrelatedness of the cognitive and the affective, leveraging the senses to capture the imagination and re-orient desires via a litany of practices rooted in mundane activities such as showering (Benson, 2019). Jesus points out the significance of the physical. He calls for discipleship of the eye and notes the danger of being entrapped by the evil one when we swear oaths, of being showy in prayer and fasting. Jesus sums these up on in terms of a physical, affective and cognitive *doing* of what he says in Mt. 7. Other collective practices include the intricate connections of the physical, affective and cognitive in the Christian community. Gratitude, respect and honouring can be transformative and are worthy of serious consideration.

To approach Christian praxis through the lens of character formation invites a particular way of engaging with the Christian habitus. As Gill points out much recent Anglican theology understands worship to be central to both ethics and theology. Hence as an Anglican author let me end with an example from worship, in particular the Eucharist. This is also for practical reasons, given it is more straightforward to shape already existing practices rather than introduce different practices in a world often complaining of initiative-fatigue. Having said this, we should remember the non-instrumental nature of worship and of the Eucharist. The Eucharist is not some instrumental tool for achieving some "higher" purpose such as character formation. Rather character formation is simply part of what happens when Eucharistic worship is undertaken in the Spirit of Christ and "the Eucharist is the core of the missional identity of the Church … of its openness to Christ who builds community out of strangers by sharing himself with them" (Paas, 2019: 199).

Very briefly consider the Eucharist undertaken in an Anglo-catholic church setting, Holy Trinity, Eltham, where I was sometime vicar. As part of the preparation for confirmation, one Sunday Eucharist was accompanied by a commentary explaining why we did what we did. Even before the service the physical action of honouring the Lord's presence, whether bowing to the altar, the cross or genuflecting at the tabernacle is already enabling the body to practise the presence of God and offering due regard to the Lord. Through the service gestures of sitting, kneeling, standing, crossing oneself and singing further enable the body to contribute to the formation of worshipful character. *Registering the love of God* through the Eucharist is fundamental – whether in the initiating love of the Father who not only gathers us but gifts us with the

very fabric of our being, the liberating forgiveness of the Son who absolves us or in the creative power of the Spirit who draws us into union with our Lord. The Good News of Jesus Christ and the story of which we are a part is rehearsed as we listen to scriptures and the sermon, appreciating that with this God we are safe, seen, soothed and secure come what may. The giftedness of life and creation is distilled in the bread and wine. The personal nature of this giftedness is distilled in Jesus, the language of "given for you" indicating representation and even substitution, all evoking praise, gratitude for the one who does all the trusting, obeying, suffering and dying for us. We participate in hope and anticipation, picturing the eating and drinking in the Kingdom of God.

The gradual sororal and fraternal relocation of those with whom we receive strengthens that sense of "my people". This communal sense is further enhanced as we rehearse our identity in the Eucharistic prayer as a *community centred on Christ*. Hence we are a people who seek to love our enemies and bless those who curse us, who know we are weak and help each other to grow where we are weak, who see what God is building in others and who create belonging (Wilder, 2018: 233).

Finally we seek to *embody Christ's way* in relation to those around us as Jesus' words "do this" soak into our bodies and minds personally. While the Eucharist helps relocate others in Christ we slip from this relocation between Eucharists. Thus at every Eucharist we are led to consider what habits, practices and skills can reshape our desires and sharpen our eucharistic living outside of the formal liturgy. We submit our relationships, agendas, meals and all that is involved in the liturgy after the liturgy to Jesus' presence and activity. Thus the Eucharist shifts from being a pious remembrance for personal encouragement to a social reality of Christ present among us. The sacrament shifts from being a performance of a redemption achieved in the past to being an inbreaking of the future Kingdom of God in the present, which inbreaking pervades our lives more and more (Cavanaugh, 1998: 222).

The evidence that character is shaped through such eucharistic worship (among other things!) is inevitably anecdotal. However my experience at Holy Trinity, Eltham suggested there was a gratitude embodied by members of the congregation which in comparing notes with neighbouring ministers (of various traditions) was not the case. This generosity was embodied in paying rising parish costs and some significant examples of "good deaths" rooted in a felt awareness of being recipients of a generosity beyond merit or expectation. Such dispositions suggested to this vicar some settled patterns of will, thought, feeling and bodily actions were being re-formed in people as a result of how they had habitually lived their lives, not least as devout members of eucharistic community.

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BOOK REVIEWS

Gorman, Michael J. 2018.
Abide and Go: Missional Theosis in the Gospel of John
Eugene: Cascade Books.
ISBN: 978-15-3261-545-0

Percy, Martyn. 2021.
The Humble Church: Renewing the Body of Christ
Norwich: Canterbury Press.
ISBN: 978-0-19-067364-2

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London: SCM Press.
ISBN: 978-0-334-05734-5

Gorman, Michael J. 2018.

Abide and Go: Missional Theosis in the Gospel of John

Eugene: Cascade Books.

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The print version of the 2016 Didsbury Lectures, *Abide and Go* presents an invigorating, new reading of the Gospel of John as God's invitation for his people to participate with the mission of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. In Chapter 1, Gorman defines his task of interpreting the fourth Gospel through a missional, participationist lens as well as explains his terminology. The heart of *Abide and Go* is Chapters 2-5 in which Gorman presents the findings of his missional theotic reading of John. In Chapter 6, which was not originally part of the Didsbury Lectures, Gorman responds to the oft-leveled criticism that John lacks the ethic of love towards enemies. The concluding chapter summarizes

the findings and contribution of *Abide and Go* as well as offering practical implications for Christian spirituality.

Before delving into the meaning of missional theosis, Gorman defines his work as "an exercise in missional hermeneutics" (2), which is defined as the interpretation of Scripture through the lens of the *missio Dei* with a view to its application for one's own context. Gorman's basic claim is that the Gospel of John centers on the perichoresis or mutual indwelling of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and invitation for all to participate in this union and mission of giving God's love and life to the world. Much attention is devoted to clarifying the controversial term "theosis", a favorite of Gorman's. He is careful to clarify that this does not mean believers become divine and offers "participation" as an alternative for those who remain uncomfortable with it.

In Chapter 2, Gorman presents his missional theotic reading of John's account of Jesus' public ministry (Chapters 1-12). He begins with the claim made by some that the fourth Gospel advocates a sectarian spirituality and responds by noting the theme of mission throughout the whole of John. From the Prologue's explication of the Father's mission in sending His Son, to the accomplishment of this mission in the account of Jesus' works and words, culminating in his death and resurrection, and concluding with the Son's mission of sending his disciples just as the Father sent him, Gorman's anti-sectarian reading of John is one of the major features of *Abide and Go*. He notes that "the Gospel of John is indeed the Gospel of life" (48), yet this theme is implicitly missional in that disciples are invited both to participate in God's love, light, and life as well as to go and share it with others.

Gorman moves on to the Farewell Discourse in Chapters 3 and 4, which he claims should more appropriately be titled "Mission Discourse" (77). In particular, he focuses on the foot washing (John 13) and the vine parable (John 15) as prime examples of missional theosis, which is ironic given that these passages are often used in support of a sectarian reading of John. By washing the disciples' feet, Jesus was not only inviting them to the believer's fellowship in his cleansing death and mutual service towards one another, but also commissioning his disciples to go and participate in his cruciform pattern of sacrificial love to the world. Similarly, the vine parable is "the most potent symbiosis of spirituality and mission in the New Testament" (102). Indeed, the title *Abide and Go* is derived from this teaching (cf. 15:6, 16). Gorman's innovation of the "creeping" or "mobile vine" elucidates the missional nature of this metaphor.

Chapter 4 focuses on a single chapter, Jesus' prayer, and thus affords Gorman the greatest latitude to expound on the text of John 17. In the Lord's prayer for himself (v. 1-5), his immediate disciples (v. 6-19), and his future disciples

(v. 20-26), Gorman emphasizes the believer's participation in the life, the love, and the mission of God to the world. Chapter 5 is the conclusion of Gorman's survey of John, focusing on his resurrection account (John 20-21). Here the Gospel comes full circle as the disciples are now sent by Christ into the world to participate in the *missio Dei* just as Christ was sent by the Father (20:21). Gorman's exposition of John 20:19-23 emphasizes both the disciples' participation in the peace and forgiveness of the Spirit as well as their commissioning to go and share this gift with others. He moves on to the miraculous catch (John 21:1-14) and Jesus' restoration of Peter (v. 15-19), emphasizing the connection between theosis and mission in Jesus' commissioning of Peter to shepherd his flock out of love for him.

In Chapter 6, Gorman responds to the critique that the Gospel of John fails to include the emphasis on loving one's enemies as in the Synoptics. He begins with the Johannine theme of God's love for the whole world, not just the elect, and goes on to discuss examples of this love in the life of Christ. In particular, Gorman demonstrates how Jesus' ministry to "a Jew, a half-Jew, and a non-Jew" (p. 163) in Chapters 3-5, washing the feet of Judas and Peter (chapter 13), as well as his response to Peter cutting off Malchus' ear (Chapter 18) constitute an implicit enemy-love in John's Gospel. The final chapter of *Abide and Go* shifts to the practical implications of Gorman's missional theosis for the personal and corporate Christian life. Gorman summarizes Chapters 1-6 and then discusses his work in light of contemporary Johannine research. Lastly, he provides five examples of missional theosis at work in the contemporary church.

With *Abide and Go*, Gorman the Pauline scholar has made a valuable contribution to the field of Johannine studies. Though he is not the first to expound on the themes of mission, participation, and theosis in John, his genius lies in his seamless synthesis and brilliant exegesis of these themes in the fourth Gospel. Of course, *Abide and Go* is not without its weaknesses, chief among them its adaptation from a lecture series. The additional work Gorman accomplished to transform the lectures into a scholarly monograph must be highly appreciated. However, would he, for example, have devoted an entire chapter to enemy-love if *Abide and Go* had from the outset been a written volume? The implicit ethic of love for enemies is not a necessary element of missional theosis in John but belongs elsewhere (e.g., in a subsequent volume on Johannine ethics). At times, Gorman's missional hermeneutic obscures John's message, e.g., his claim that missional theosis in John is just as "cruciform" as in Paul (128). Such efforts to establish uniformity between Pauline and Johannine theology fail to appreciate their unique Sitze im Leben. Finally, *Abide and Go* is, in Gorman's own words, "primarily text-centered" (180), and thus its implications for personal

and corporate Christian spirituality necessitate further elaboration. Indeed, in the concluding reflection on the practical implications of his study, only one of Gorman's five examples of missional theosis is a church. Three are faith-based organizations, and one is a monastic fraternity, which leaves the reader wondering how feasibly Gorman's theology applies to the local church. Nevertheless, *Abide and Go* remains a helpful resource in Johannine studies, particularly as concerns the themes of mission and participation, and will hopefully serve as an inspiration for further academic research in these areas.

REVIEWED BY KRISTINE STACHE

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Martyn Percy, a former Dean of Christ's Church who spent years teaching at Oxford University, provides for readers in this, his most recent book, an alternative way of thinking about ecclesiology in response to the current state of the Church and the world. The Church, he states, "often lacks strategic patience, and is too keen to react rather than reflect" (xv). Percy utilizes a missiological lens to shape his ministerial and academic work and centers his ecclesiology on who God is and what God has and continues to do in Christ. Jesus is "the actual expression of God-in word, deeds, actions, silences, walking being-of what God is doing" (2). This starting point of who God is provides for Percy a way for the church to "see the world differently, and therefore ourselves and our neighbours in a fresh light" (xxviii).

The Humble Church: Renewing the Body of Christ is an interesting blend of a wide variety of ingredients. Percy uses grammar to make a Christological case for a missional ecclesiology ("Jesus is the verb of God" (2)), and throws poetry and a bit of math in for good measure ("to be a church of multiplication, not division" (4)). From the beginning, Percy invites the reader to "allow God to resume God's place in our life, faith, and world" (xviii), which ultimately leads to the renewal of the body of Christ.

Percy covers a lot of territory in less than 200 pages (almost too much). After an introductory chapter that sets the stage for using humble as a preferred word to describe the church, Percy organizes his argument into three sections, each with three chapters, and ends the book with a bonus study guide for groups or individuals. He then closes it with additional resources and further reading.

In the first part of the book, titled *Culture and Change*, Percy provides a critique of the church growth movement, making a case that the church must move from a focus on increasing numbers to becoming counterculture. Growth and mission (and thus the renewal of the body of Christ) for Percy are more akin to farming, and the flourishing of the seeds (26). "The church does not exist to grow. It exists to glorify God and follow Jesus Christ" (26). Counting and numerical growth are not the way to measure the church. Instead Percy asks us "to see as God sees, count as God would count … all matter" (45). It is in this flourishing of mutual relationships that we create a co-dependency on one another. "We are invited to humble ourselves and recognize our mutual dependencies" (56). In this process all are included and we continue to be shaped and formed into the body of Christ.

The second part of his book, *Challenge and Church*, Percy sketches the ever-changing landscape that continues to shape Christian beliefs and practices (63). The first chapter of this section focuses on generational differences, the second proposes appropriate responses to abuse by clergy and those in authority, and the third chapter identifies discrimination practices based on race, gender and disability and how they continue to prevent the church from flourishing. The challenge I found with his addressing so many huge, yet important, topics is they get lost (almost trivialized) with such a cursory introduction and left this reader craving more explicit connections to his proposal for the Church to be humble Church.

Christ and Christianity, the third section of the book, lays out a theological argument for the church as an inclusive body for all. "Jesus is an expression of God's heart for humanity. He is the body language of God. The Kingdom for all" (113). This then shapes mission and evangelism in a humble church as one that has historically "listened deeply and lived its faith, faithful and unassumingly,

rather than brashly promoting its brand" (121). The church's response as a listener then leads to kenosis, to be come a "self-emptying church" (140). In order to do this we all must take on "the vocation of humility" (143) argues Percy.

Percy's critique of the Church and Church structures is neither surprising nor new. While his argument for a humble Church has potential, his chapters are a bit too disconnected to make a case for the Church to be more than just a listening community. Percy's work on the *missio Dei* is spot on, recognizing God's activity in and through the world to and through the church, however its connection back to the role of the humble church remains a bit fuzzy. If one agrees that we are called to be the "Verb of God", then listening is merely the starting point. Humbleness and humility are not merely postures but actual lenses to interpret the listening and action.

This book, I believe, could be a good conversation starter for groups that care deeply about the relationship the church has with the world. Such conversations could take Percy's insights and ideas to push, pull and interpret further. Listening and reflecting is ultimately about learning. I think Percy himself would agree. "We cannot know everything, and nor should we assume we can. Which is why a humble, grounded church that listens, and is receptive and adaptive, is the key to the church recovering its vocation, and revitalizing its mission" (10).

Spencer, Stephen. 2019.

Growing and Flourishing. The Ecology of Church Growth

London: SCM Press.

REVIEWED BY PATRICK TODJERAS

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Revd Canon Dr Stephen Spencer leads the theological education initiative for the Anglican Communion and is based at the Anglican Communion Office (since 2018). He was previously vice principal at St Hild College in Yorkshire. He also has experience as a parish priest and has written several theological books. During his time in the Diocese of Leeds he was Link Officer for the diocesan Companion Link with the Dioceses of Mara, Rorya and Tarime in Tanzania.

Stephen Spencer presents an inspiring study that discusses church growth in an international environment. The purpose of this book is to encourage and inform church growth (94). He does indeed achieve his goal.

It is a work of popular theology, but it is food for thought for theologians addressing questions of how to speak rightly of growth in the Christian life. It seeks an answer from outside the West. Spencer enables us to hear the Anglican diocese of Mara in Tanzania. In doing so, he applies the lessons learned about church growth in the Diocese of Mara, Rorya and Tarime in Tanzania to the British context and compares them to a fairly typical medium-sized church in a provincial town.

His initial understanding of church growth is based on the Anglican definition of growth as spiritual and numerical growth including its capacity to serve the whole community (Church of England, GS 995). Thus he develops the image of an ecology of church growth, meaning the interconnectedness of the church and its growth with its environment.

A distinctive feature of the book is the narrative form of the accounts, such as the vivid description of church growth in the Mara region (16-19) or the extensive quotes from leaders in the Mara region. The Mara region has seen substantial growth over the last 30 years – growing from a dozen parishes in 1985 to 150 parishes in 2010 (3, 15-16). In interviewing a cross-section of people at the heart of this church growth, both lay and ordained, he gathers their insights into the 'why' and 'how' of church growth.

Stephen Spencer discovers six factors for church growth in the Mara region. Alongside numerical growth there has been growth of congregational relationships, growth of interactive evangelism, an increasing dynamism of sacramental life, a strengthening of community service, and a nurturing of personal discipleship (42). Spencer conceptualizes them in six dimensions that can be developed in up to three stages: institutional growth, congregational relationships, evangelistic communication, sacramental expression, community service and discipleship (53-93; see the summary as a graph on page 93).

The 'numerical growth' factor is interesting. It was not measured in the number of individual conversions but in the number of new congregations. This shows a communal approach to evangelism (39).

In a theoretical classification, he interprets the results through the lens of Avery Dulles' survey of ecclesiology in his *Models of the Church*. This multiple correspondence with Dulles' highly regarded survey of ecclesiology shows that what has been happening in Mara region is not an oddity with little relevance to the wider church but rather an example of the wider multi-faceted nature of the Catholic Church (48). In particular, the role of evangelism rooted in the community life of the congregation and its relationships with its surrounding community is important.

For Spencer, what church growth means becomes clear here. It cannot just be an increase in the size of the gathered church – viewed as a self-contained institution. Instead it is an "increase of interaction with its surrounding community in which neither side loses itself but in which both build up purposeful and life-giving relationships" (51).

In the carry-over of his findings, Spencer discusses studies of the Anglican church growth scene and brings up comparables and differences. For example, Spencer argues that the evangelistic and sacramental dimensions are missing in Michael Moynagh's reflection on fresh expression of church (98-101).

In the final part of his study, "Bringing Mara growth home", he discusses the church growth initiative of a British congregation that took several intentional steps to address the growth of their church. From after-school clubs, to messy church, to godly play, new attempts were made again and again. These attempts are discussed and recognized by Spencer with his framework of six dimensions.

An outstanding effect of the ecology analog is that the author does not describe the six dimensions as steps, but organically. This means that growth is not manufactured through an instrumental process but must be cultivated in an interactive and response way, like nurturing crops in a vegetable garden (112).

Critically, the comparability of the two contexts (Tanzania, Britain) is not discussed in depth (4-5) and so does not defuse the criticism of a carry-over. At times, the description of transferable insights (such as numerical growth) felt as if a more critical edge would help. Finally, the theological normativity of his notion of growth requires a critical theological counterweight, which Spencer does not provide here enough. For this, I am happy to recommend Martyn Percy's book in the following review by Kristine Stache.

Ecclesial Futures publishes original research and theological reflection on the development and transformation of local Christian communities and the systems that support them as they join in the mission of God in the world.

We understand local Christian communities broadly to include traditional "parish" churches and independent local churches, religious communities and congregations, new church plants, so-called "fresh expressions" of church, "emergent" churches, and "new monastic" communities.

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