'For The Parish' A Review.

‘For The Parish’ aims to be a theological critique of the ‘fresh expressions of church’ phenomenon in general, and of the ‘Mission Shaped Church’ report that launched it, in particular. It makes some important points that need to be taken on board. However, it makes them in a tendentious way that makes it hard for the message to be heard in the circles that most need to hear it.

The authors’ main contention is that we cannot change the form of church without affecting the message. In this case the medium really is the message. They argue that there has been a lack of serious theological thought about ‘fresh expressions of church’, and therefore we are unwittingly in danger of perverting the Gospel in the pursuit of novelty. This is an important warning that we would do well to heed.

I would agree with the authors in several points. So called ‘fresh expressions’ are not always fresh expressions of church. Often they are outreach groups or activities with little or no potential to become church in themselves. However, even when we are talking about a true ‘fresh expression’ of church, such expressions need the inherited mode of church for a number of reasons; for its stability, its accountability, to make sure that fresh expressions do not become exclusive and isolationist, and for its (relative) permanence. I would also agree that hope of effective mission in Britain is closely bound up with a re-vivifying of inherited ways of being church. Neither the traditional parish system, nor traditional church have had their day and I think that very few of us involved with fresh expressions in the Church of England would say so. Traditional ways of being church and ‘fresh expressions’ need each other.

Having agreed with much of the authors’ main premise, I wish to make a number of specific criticisms.

1). This book assumes that ‘fresh expressions’ on the one hand, and ‘inherited church’ and the traditional parish system on the other, are mutually exclusive and cannot exist together. I would say that this is manifestly and demonstrably untrue.

2). Its depiction of ‘fresh expressions’ is inaccurate and distorted. It chooses the most fatuous examples and never examines the best. It speaks of hostility to the traditional parish church where none exists, and it simply misrepresents the whole movement. For example, it accuses ‘fresh expressions’ of ignoring the occasional offices. There is a whole book in the ‘Mission Shaped’ series devoted to the mission of the traditional parish church (‘Mission Shaped Parish’), and a good deal of this is devoted to the mission opportunities of the occasional offices. This is simply ignored by the authors.

Sometimes, this misreading of the situation almost appears to be wilful. For example (130), ‘in the report (‘Mission Shaped Church’) the church is asked to die so that contemporary culture might be saved.’ This is perverse. It presents the Report as asking for the disappearance of church as we know it, whereas it is actually asking for change in some aspects of the churches life, for us to die to some of our preferences at

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1 ‘For The Parish’ Andrew Davison and Alison Milbank, 2010 (SCM)
2 ‘a way of describing the planting of new congregations or churches which are different in ethos and style from the church which planted them; because they are designed to reach a different group of people than those already attending the original church. The emphasis is on planting something which is appropriate to its context, rather than cloning something which works elsewhere.’ (Graham Cray).
3 Mission-shaped Church: Church Planting and Fresh Expressions of Church in a Changing Context’ Graham Cray 2004 (Church House Publishing)
times, so that others might be saved. It is manifestly not asking for such sacrifice so that ‘contemporary culture might be saved’, but rather so that contemporary PEOPLE might be saved. This is such a tendentious misreading of the report that it almost beggars belief, but sadly it does not stand alone. Such errors, and gross misreadings pepper the report.

3). The authors have a rosy and romantic view of inherited ways of being church. In practice most parish churches, though often very successful at reaching certain groups in the population, almost entirely miss other sections. The authors present traditional church as if it were always inclusive and missionary in intent and practice. At its best, this can be the case, but many are inward looking, and many are monocultures, and therefore fairly exclusive.

One of their principal critiques of the ‘fresh expressions’ movement is that it relies on the ‘homogenous unit principle’, and that this thereby neutralise the Gospel dynamic that breaks down barriers and reconciles across difference. It is odd therefore that ‘For The Parish’ both fails to seriously engage with this frequent failing of the traditional parish, and fails to recognise that this aspect of ‘fresh expressions’ is an attempt to reach out beyond such exclusivism. Surely the point is that as like does attract like, we generally have to begin with groups of like-minded people who need introducing to the kingdom of God. Once so introduced, the task of adopting the values of the King begins, which, among other things, means crossing cultural boundaries to accept as brothers and sisters people who are different from us. In this respect traditional parish church and ‘fresh expressions’ need each other. The boot is on both feet. It will not do for the authors to rest content with a church culture that marginalises many (particularly men, the young, and the working class), and then to reject an attempt to reach out to such groups for being too exclusive.

5). In its presentation of the English parish church as the norm, and its refusal to look at issues of context and enculturation, ‘For The Parish’ proceeds as though centuries of missionary expansion of the church, and associated adaptation of cultural forms, had never happened, and as though we did not live in an ecumenical context where church has already taken many forms. In practice such issues emerge within the pages of the New Testament and have not stopped emerging ever since. To ignore this history (especially in a book that prides itself on being a thorough academic study) is most extraordinary.

6). The last mistake leads to the authors most fundamental error. They treat the English parish church as almost a defining, ontological category. Anything that threatens change to this particular and cultural manifestation of the church seems to be a threat to the essence of church and therefore to the essence of the Gospel.

The authors argue (at one level quite correctly) that the church is not just a means to an end, it is the end itself. Leaving aside that this fails to make a proper distinction between Christ and his Church, it nevertheless makes the important point that our eternal future is as part of the community of all the redeemed. However, this is surely not identical with the visible church here on earth. If we ask the simple question, ‘Will there be PCCs in heaven?’ we can see this at a glance.

In practice the authors use the word ‘church’ without further definition, in a multitude of overlapping ways. This enables them to present ‘fresh expressions’ as a serious threat to ‘the Church’ in a way that only retains plausibility if we do not enquire too closely exactly what they mean by ‘church’.

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5 ‘the homogenous unit principle’: that like attracts like, and that therefore the most effective way to share faith is among people who are culturally similar.
7). There is a fair amount of intellectual and cultural snobbery at work here. It is full of references to Oxford college chapels, to great art and music, and to ‘The Book of Common Prayer’, without a thought for those who are culturally miles away from them. It is not my intention to knock, marginalised or denigrate any of the cultural icons they stand for, or any of the rich Christian tradition that flows through them, and still nurtures many. I simply want to draw attention to the many people for whom such a culture does not resonate.

8). One of the central planks of the author’s attack on ‘fresh expressions’ and the ‘Mission Shaped Church’ report, is that the whole movement fails to take seriously a proper theology of mediation, namely, that the cultural manifestation of a thing is not just a discardable wrapping, but is part of the meaning, not just signifying, but rather embodying that meaning. It is a powerful point, well made, and were ‘fresh expressions’ practitioners to take it on board, the movement would be all the stronger. However, the authors do not seem to see how this critique might apply equally to them and to traditional church. At their best ‘fresh expressions’ advocates, far from denying that such ‘mediation’ takes place, simply maintain that in a fast changing culture, such embodiments of truth needs radical, intentional thought applied to the forms of mediation. Context is important. Were Jesus to return to 21st-century Guildford would he appear again as a first century Jew, and if he did not, would the authors accuse him of lacking a theology of mediation?

Nevertheless, form does affect meaning and content, and if our ‘fresh expressions’ are not to run the danger of slipping into self-indulgence, individualistic exclusivism, or a ‘consumerist’ mentality, they need to be closely involved with, and accountable to other parts of the body of Christ. There is clearly a danger of some manifestations of ‘fresh expressions’ being as un-critical of contemporary culture as ‘For The Parish’ is of inherited church. The authors’ point about traditional church’s ability to transcend the age in which it now finds itself, and therefore to offer a critical perspective, to offer another point of view, if you like, is an important one. However, this is not the only possible source of another point of view. Supremely of course, we find such an alternative place to stand from Scripture itself, and lest we read Scripture through the distorting lens of our own culture and prejudices, we need the perspective of Christians of other traditions and from other cultures than our own. Inherited forms of church need these to. It is just as possible to be trapped in a culture inherited from the past as trapped by a culture newly minted in the present.

Nevertheless, the centuries in which the Church has been shaped and formed have given a richness, complexity and subtlety to many of its expressions that ‘fresh expressions’ would do well not to ignore lest they stay in the shallows and become unsatisfying in the longer run. As ‘For The Parish’ says, ‘fresh expressions’ need to be related to the rest of the vine. I fully concur, but would add that in my experience they usually are.

‘For The Parish’ has the potential to be a useful corrective, but it would have come across much better if it had not denigrated just about every useful idea from the ‘fresh expressions’ movement, and if it had not been so defensive. This defensiveness becomes very clear (54) when they accuse the ‘Mission Shaped Church’ report of practising ‘moral blackmail over members of the inherited church, urged to give up what they love and value when no similar sacrifices are being offered from the enthusiasts for emergent church.’ This is bizarre on several counts, firstly, no one is
trying to close inherited church. More fundamentally, those whom emergent church is trying to reach are, on the whole, not yet Christians, while those in inherited church, on the whole, are. There is simply no equivalence.

I find it difficult to understand how anyone who has struggled with front line mission among those for whom traditional versions of church are either incomprehensible or deeply uncongenial, can argue like this. Those who do not know Christ and whom the Church is currently failing to reach are simply missing from the picture in ‘For The Parish’. For followers of the one who taught ‘The Parable of The Lost Sheep’, this is surely a very serious omission.

Given these objections, I still strongly wish to affirm the missionary practice and potential of inherited ways of being church. I understand my present job as mission adviser as being partly to assist ‘fresh expressions’ and to be wholly ‘for the parish’. We would have to be very foolish to write off, or even to marginalise traditional ways of being church. It is just that they cannot be the only way if we are to ‘become all things to all men so that by all possible means (we) might save some.’