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Graham Cray

***For the Parish* by Andrew Davison and Alison Milbank - A Response**

In their recent book, *For the Parish*, Andrew Davison and Alison Milbank offer a strong critique of Fresh Expressions and *Mission-Shaped Church*. In this response, Bishop Graham Cray highlights and responds to six of their criticisms, arguing they seriously mislead and misrepresent both the report and Fresh Expressions. He identifies contrasting approaches to the gospel and culture as underlying many of the differences before noting three areas of shared concerns.

For the Parish 1 is a profoundly frustrating book. This is partly because of its discourteous and disparaging tone, partly because of its massive misreading of its subject matter - *Mission-Shaped Church* 2 and the Fresh Expressions Initiative - but also because the important theological truths and practical concerns about the church which it affirms are hard to access directly, because they are deployed to demolish a complete caricature. Its misinterpretations detract from the important issues it affirms.

For the Parish lacks any sense of perspective about either the purpose or the scope of *Mission-Shaped Church*, describing it as determining 'the shape of ecclesiology in the C of E' (1) and as 'a wholesale reconfiguration of the identity of the C of E' (41), which 'completely undermines what we share as Anglicans' (103). 3

At the outset it is worth setting out the brief which the Church of England gave to the *Mission-Shaped Church* working party. The 1994 *Breaking New Ground* report was out of print. We were asked to assess its continuing relevance and to draft its successor, with particular reference to

- a. An assessment of progress with 'church planting' as a mission model.
- b. Changing cultural and ecclesial contexts - what is the environment in which we are called to be and do church?
- c. A look at issues of 'emerging church' and 'new church'.
- d. Issues such as 'youth church', cell church, multiple congregations, network (non-geographical) church etc.

This brief gave the report its shape and set its limits. *Mission-Shaped Church* is about mission and church planting. Necessarily it provides some theological foundations to sustain its main arguments but it was never intended to contain a detailed, fully developed ecclesiology, beyond its primary focus. Chapter five (the primary theological chapter) identified itself with, and assumed the ecclesiology of, two key reports 'Eucharistic Presidency' (from the House of Bishops) and 'Presence and Prophecy' (General Synod). 4

If, as the authors of *For the Parish* claim, the parochial system 'defines the C of E's ecclesiology?' (viii) then that 'definition' has regularly been supplemented by additional

provision: chaplaincies of many sorts, chapels of ease, religious communities, non parochial cathedral congregations, and so on. *Mission-Shaped Church* understood the parochial system to be the practice through which the Church of England has embodied one of its primary pastoral and missionary values - to be a national church, a church for all. Additional provision has always been an application and development of this value.

It was out of commitment to this primary value, and to the missionary nature of our Church, that we wrote:

It is clear to us that the parochial system remains an essential and central part of the national Church's strategy to deliver incarnational mission. But the existing parochial system alone is no longer able fully to deliver its underlying mission purpose. We need to recognize that a variety of integrated missionary approaches is required. A mixed economy of parish churches and network churches will be necessary, in an active partnership across a wider area, perhaps a deanery. 5

Andrew Davison, (who wrote chapters 1-6 on the basis of a literature search, without, he told me, visiting any fresh expressions) saw fresh expressions as independent from parishes, claiming that 'until now the average Fresh Expression has had little or nothing to do with its parish, deanery or diocese' (16). 6 In fact, the vast majority of fresh expressions in the Church of England are new congregations planted by parish churches and most of the remainder are deanery or diocesan initiatives. 7 Fresh expressions often serve as an extension of the ministry of these parishes and deaneries, helping them to remain true to their calling to be the church for all.

The *Mission-Shaped Church* report gave considerable emphasis to the need for legally authorised network church plants to supplement existing parochial provision. It did so, not because the majority of fresh expressions of church would need to be independent of parishes, but because those that were not parochially based required new legislation, now provided by Bishop's Mission Orders (BMOs). This was a report to the General Synod, which would have to give grounds for any proposed legislative changes. On this matter, we worked in close cooperation with the Toyne Commission, which was revising the Pastoral Measure. Their analysis agreed with ours, and they then proposed the BMO legislation. New congregations planted within a parish did not need legislative changes. However, the majority (twelve) of the examples given in *Mission-Shaped Church* are fresh expressions as an extension of a parish church's ministry, two others are deanery initiatives, and two are diocesan ones.

For the Parish also completely ignores the ecumenical nature of the Fresh Expressions' initiative, which is concerning. The authors come near to making exclusive claims for their particular understanding of the Church of England that would fall far short of our existing ecumenical understanding and commitments, let alone the perceptions of many other Anglicans.

In responding to the book I will first answer the main points of the critique before highlighting a fundamental underlying difference of interpretation, and then noting some important areas of shared concern:

Response to *For the Parish's* critiques

1. Faulty methodology

It is claimed that - by making an inappropriate distinction between the forms of the faith and the meaning or content of the faith - the Fresh Expressions initiative uses a faulty methodology based on a philosophical mistake. The authors rightly say that the meaning can only be learned and embraced through the forms. They marshal an impressive collection of philosophers and theologians to make their case. But this heavy artillery is aimed at a mirage. The quotations and metaphors which provide the basis for this criticism make no such distinction. The statements in *Mission-Shaped Church* about those who, 'fuse the meaning and the forms of the gospel' 8 or about the 'one gospel having many clothes' 9 come from serious missiological reflection about the relationship between gospel and cultures. One is from an international Lausanne consultation, in which I participated, another from an international collection of case studies drawn up under the aegis of the Evangelical Fellowship of the Anglican Communion, in preparation for Lambeth 1998. 10 Both concerned the engagement of the gospel with diverse and changing cultures. What was being addressed was the danger of confusing the specific cultural forms of the church *in a particular place and time*, with the universal embodiment (not just the propositional content!) of the gospel itself. An example would be a conviction that the church's responsibility to teach the scriptures could only be fulfilled if it used the Authorised Version. Such confusions distance the church from culture in an inappropriate way, making it out of touch instead of counter-cultural.

Fresh expressions of church will develop recognisably Christian patterns of worship, prayer and catechesis, but they will develop them in a culturally appropriate way. The concept of 'translation', criticized in *For the Parish*, is a well established missiological theme 11 (which I will develop later) and does not imply any simplistic separation of form and content.

For the Parish also almost totally fails to come to grips with the report's primary term 'inculturation' 12 despite the fact that, in my chairman's introduction, I wrote:

One of the central features of this report is the recognition that the changing nature of our missionary context requires a new inculturation of the gospel within our society. The theology and practice of inculturation or contextualization is well established in the world Church, but has received little attention for mission in the West. We have drawn on this tradition as a major resource for the Church of England. 13

2. Culture-free Christianity and an inherently neutral culture?

The inaccurate accusation that Fresh Expressions literature assumes that Christian Faith is essentially culture free, reducible to 'so many propositions' (22) and 'cultureless in itself' (23) is compounded by another misreading: that we see culture as 'inherently neutral', uncritically available as 'clothing for the church' (39).

Fresh expressions practitioners do not regard culture as neutral; nor does *Mission-Shaped Church* say or imply that it is. Rather, it is seen as providing a profound missional challenge to the church because it is both the unavoidable contemporary context of the church's mission and provides the primary challenge to authentic Christian discipleship. At various strategic points *Mission-Shaped Church* made it clear that the Church is called to be a countercultural community.

Firstly, in my Chairman's introduction I wrote:

Inculturation is central to this report because it provides a principled basis for the costly crossing of cultural barriers and the planting of the church into a changed social context. Church has to be planted, not cloned. At the same time, any principle based on Christ's incarnation is inherently counter-cultural, in that it aims at faithful Christian discipleship within the new context, rather than cultural conformity.

The gospel has to be heard within the culture of the day, but it always has to be heard as a call to appropriate repentance. It is the incarnation of the gospel, within a dominantly consumer society, that provides the Church of England with its major missionary challenge. 14

Secondly, the counter-cultural emphasis is evident in the five values which the report said should characterise any fresh or inherited expression of church, irrespective of its cultural context:

A missionary church is active in calling people to faith in Jesus Christ, and it is equally committed to the development of a consistent Christian lifestyle appropriate to, but not withdrawn from, the culture or cultures in which it operates. It engages with culture, but also presents a counter-cultural challenge by its corporate life based on the world view and values of the gospel. 15

Thirdly, in the theological chapter, we wrote:

But, 'the incarnation of divine love in a world of sin leads to the cross'. 16 Jesus belonged to his own culture and yet was prophetically critical of it. His life of faithful obedience to his Father, in his culture, led to his death. It is through his death and resurrection that he was shown to be the universal Lord who is able to belong to and challenge the cultures of every time and place. 17 The incarnation should never be separated from the cross. In the same way, Christians are called to live, within each culture, under the lordship of Christ, irrespective of the cost.

A truly incarnational Church is one that imitates, through the Spirit, both Christ's loving identification with his culture and his costly counter-cultural stance within it. His announcement of, and promise of, God's kingdom cannot be separated from his call to repentance, as the price of entry. Following his example, his Church is called to loving identification with those to whom it is sent, and to exemplify the way of life to which those who repent turn. Otherwise its call to repentance is reduced to detached moralizing.' 18

Fourthly, later in the theological chapter, in discussing the challenge of syncretism, we note:

All attempts at inculturation struggle with the danger of syncretism. 'In the attempt to be "relevant" one may fall into syncretism, and in the effort to avoid syncretism one may become irrelevant.' ¹⁹ Britain at the start of the third millennium is predominantly a consumer society. The missionary challenge is to embody the Church within it, while also challenging the prevailing consumerist pattern. Inculturation seeks the gospel transformation of a society from within, and so a distinctive Christian lifestyle in a consumer society is fundamental to the task. 'The everyday challenge of consumerism is yet to be fully acknowledged by most Christian communities.' ²⁰ The willingness to 'die to live' provides one key to this challenge. A commitment to lay aside one's own preferences, give priority to a different culture, and work with those in it to discover how to express an authentic shared life in Christ, is the opposite of self-centred consumerism. To live under the lordship of Christ is to exercise our powers of choice in submission to his will, as we seek the interests of others. ²¹

This emphasis on the countercultural demands of the gospel is then illustrated with a Vincent Donovan story whose inclusion puzzles *For the Parish* precisely because it involves the gospel requiring a change in culture (2).

These strategically placed statements provide the key to understanding the descriptive sections of the report. Contemporary culture is described in sociological detail because this was part of our brief. The detail is intended to aid understanding of our missionary context not because 'the church is most effective when it adopts the cultures of the world' (89) or because 'theology is trumped by pragmatic considerations' (41). Description does not imply approval. It does imply taking the context of mission seriously.

3. Failure to grasp the mediatory nature of the church

Allied to practitioners of fresh expressions alleged lack a proper understanding of culture, is the criticism that they also lack an understanding of the mediatory role of the church. *For the Parish* expresses this mediatory role very well:

In mission we share God's work: in mission we pass on the saving message through human words and communities, through human words, drama and music. Supremely, what we draw people into through mission is the life of Christ lived out - and thereby mediated - in the community of his Body the Church. (39)

This is followed by a magnificent quotation from von Balthasar, explaining how Jesus 'calls others to join with him in the special task of continuing his work' (40). ²² This time the full weight of a world-class theologian is being thrown at a caricature!

Mission-Shaped Church emphasizes that mission is *Missio Dei* - the mission of God, before, and as the context of, its being the mission of the Church. 'The Church is both the fruit of God's mission - those whom he has redeemed, and the community through whom he acts for the world's redemption'. ²³ As such, the Church is part of the

gospel, not merely instrumental to it. *Mission-Shaped Church* has its own equivalent of van Balthasar's fine statement, from James Torrance the Church of Scotland theologian: 'The mission of the Church is the gift of participating through the Holy Spirit in the Son's mission from the Father to the world.' 24 This participation gives the Church its mediatory role.

4. Inadequate individualised understanding of salvation

For the Parish suggests that fresh expressions are 'embarrassed' (42) about the church, just seeing it as a means to an end, rather than as a foretaste of God's final purposes, and thus rejecting 'a church shaped salvation' (43).

This does neither the movement nor the literature justice. *Mission-Shaped Church* was about the 'Church' in mission in a changing context - not about individualized salvation - precisely because salvation has 'an ecclesial dimension' (49). It is bizarre to find this as a critique of a report about 'church' planting, about communities of faith!

For the Parish quotes *Eucharistic Presidency* approvingly: 'the church is granted an anticipation of the final fulfilment of the divine purpose for the whole creation' (49). 25 *Mission-Shaped Church*, quotes the same document *Eucharistic Presidency*, affirming that the Church is 'not only a sign and an instrument, but a genuine foretaste of God's kingdom', 26 which is the same thing!

For the Parish claims that *Mission-Shaped Church* assumes a 'conservative American Protestant' (55) theology, in which 'the church is extrinsic to salvation' (39) and that salvation concerns 'autonomous Christians' (58) whose faith is 'just propositions' (22-3). Unfortunately this reading is extrinsic to the text, and has been read into it by its critics!

For the Parish's critique also makes much of the church being an 'agent' of salvation rather than an 'instrument' of it. 27 The primary response to this must be that the Church of England uses the combination of 'sign, instrument and foretaste' when it addresses these issues in formal documents and ecumenical agreements 28 so 'instrument' is an acceptable term in this context. Lesslie Newbigin argued against the church as 'agent' because he wished to safeguard the primacy of the Spirit in mission: 'The Church is not so much the agent of the mission, as the locus of the mission. It is God who acts in power by his Spirit.' 29

For the Parish suggests that Fresh expressions' thinking prioritizes the kingdom over the church in such a way that the church is reduced to less than its biblical dignity and identity (50f). On the other extreme, John Hull chastised *Mission-Shaped Church* for being about a 'church shaped mission' and not about the kingdom! 30 (It is particularly bizarre to find Hull, who is as scornful of *Mission-Shaped Church* from his perspective as *For the Parish*, from its very different perspective, treated as 'starkly representative of the Fresh Expressions approach' (51)

Christians hope for more than the church. They hope for new heavens and a new earth, and for 'the kingdom of this world to become the kingdom of our God'. They hope for the final destruction of evil and for the reconciliation of 'all things' in Christ. But if (as quoted above) the church is a foretaste of the kingdom, a pointer to the kingdom in its fullness, precisely because it is itself a foretaste of the reality to which it points, then obviously there is a (purified) 'church shaped salvation' (48) as part of our inheritance in Christ. *Mission-Shaped Church* says so. The church is called to be 'an imperfect local pilot plant of God's future world'. ³¹ As such, it must also be a 'supernatural reality'. ³² How could anyone find eternal salvation in it, if it was not so!

It is, however, still theologically correct to make the distinction between the kingdom of God, as 'a divine activity' in contrast to the church, as 'a human community'. ³³ This is a fundamental New Testament distinction. There is a substantial consensus in New Testament scholarship that Jesus' use of the term 'kingdom of God' means God's active and redemptive sovereign rule. Through him God was restoring his just rule. The Church is first of all the community of human beings brought under that rule, and only as a consequence, the community in whom that rule is demonstrated and through whom it is extended.

For the Parish believes *Mission-Shaped Church* makes too sharp a distinction between the kingdom and the church. On the contrary, its authors are in danger of collapsing the kingdom into the church.

5. A 'flight to segregation'

For the Parish sees the development of fresh expressions of church as a 'flight to segregation' (the title of chapter four); claiming that the American 'Church Growth' idea of 'homogeneous units' provides the foundation for many of the *Mission-Shaped Church* report's proposals. ³⁴

It is the case that Church Growth thinking, of which the Homogeneous Unit Principle was only one point, was influential in some parts of the church in the 1980s. It was popularised in the UK by the Bible Society, in a revised form which had taken note of the more substantial criticisms. In its UK form it offered at least some answers to the problem that many parish congregations were already more or less homogeneous units ie groups made up of a single people type or culture. It opened the way to expanding their reach by engaging with groups which had been untouched. As such its major impact was on the numerical growth of existing churches, not on church planting. It was a further instalment of the attempt to get more people to 'come to us', rather than our 'going to them'.

As George Lings has demonstrated, ³⁵ the Church Planting thinking of the 1990s did not use the managerial and mechanical metaphors of the Church Growth movement. It developed horticultural or biological models (as fitting for 'plants'). These are reflected in *Mission-Shaped Church*. ³⁶ It is a mistake to see the UK Church Planting movement as a development of Church Growth thinking. The authors of *For the Parish* have been misled by this assumption and have not paid proper attention to the

report's own sources of theological inspiration. Frequently in their critique a misreading of certain quotations as 'Protestant individualism' or as dependent on US 'church growth' theory has blinded them to the main arguments and prevented them from addressing the report in its own terms.

The Fresh Expressions initiative and the *Mission-Shaped Church* report both draw primarily on contemporary missiology. Particular influences are the ecumenical consensus that mission is first of all *Missio Dei*, the literature of the Gospel and Culture movement, and post-Vatican 2 Roman Catholic thinking on incarnational mission, now usually referred to as inculturation. There is particular emphasis on the significance of the incarnation as being both a unique salvific event and, only derivatively, the paradigm for the Church's mission as it crosses cultural boundaries with the gospel. The distinction between the two is made clear from the first page of the introduction. ³⁷ It is not the mystery of the incarnation as such - or the much disputed nature of kenotic theory - which is pertinent here, but the fact that the Word became flesh in a particular culture, that the act of incarnation was culture specific. The Son of God became a first-century Palestinian Jew. But (in contrast to Islam) the subsequent Christian mission did not propagate his culture or language as the inseparable bearer of the gospel. The Gospel documents retain only a few words of Jesus' mother tongue. They are missionary translations. Incarnation, inculturation and translation are closely interrelated concepts. ³⁸ After Vatican 2, Roman Catholic missiology developed a praxis based on the incarnation and, because the use of the incarnation in missiology can only be an analogy based on one aspect of the incarnation, its cultural specificity, the term 'inculturation' was coined. This is the primary concept used in *Mission-Shaped Church*.

When St Paul set out his way of life, and in particular his practice of mission, as an imitation of Christ (1 Cor. 11:1 concluding 8:1-11:1) he drew on the example of Christ's death as much as of his life. Incarnation and cross are treated as two dimensions of the one divine self sacrifice. ³⁹ The resulting 'interchange' (Morna Hooker) between Christ and humans, and then between the evangelist and those he seeks to win, is a close parallel to the exchange between cultures which lies at the heart of inculturation (sometimes referred to as 'intercultural' because of this). The imitation of Christ in the New Testament is nearly always the imitation of his self-sacrifice. Drawing on this emphasis we coined the term 'dying to live' to express the sacrifice involved in establishing a fresh expression of church which is culturally distinct from the planters' previous experience. It is the missionaries who pay the initial cultural price for cross-cultural mission, Only then can the gospel properly address the receptor culture from within. The authors of *For the Parish* regard this as 'manipulative' in which case all calls for self-sacrifice, in mission for the sake of others, are vulnerable to the same accusation.

For the Parish may dislike this whole incarnational principle but it has been the theological basis of cross-cultural mission around the world, the pattern of mission which is now required here. ⁴⁰ But does it lead to diversity or disunity?

Many fresh expressions of church establish a bridgehead for the gospel through a particular group, which they have engaged, but bridgeheads are beginnings not final

outcomes. This is not a recipe for niche church. In the New Testament, boundary-crossing mission led to new problems of unity, which the church then had to address and resolve. That is the right order. The mission to the Gentiles was not put on hold because it created problems for the unity of the church, nor because all types of Gentiles were not being evangelized at the same time. When previously unreached people find faith, it is the church's task to resolve the new challenges to unity which have been created by the missionary Spirit.

For the Parish provides an excellent exposition of the multicultural nature of the New Testament church and of 1Corinthians 12-14, and then accuses fresh expression of 'deferring' (69ff) this cross-cultural integration until the eschaton, to allow niche church now. On the surface this is a much more convincing argument than most of those discussed so far.

I have no wish to split apart the vertical and horizontal dimensions of Christ's reconciling work. Every expression of church should demonstrate the gospel's reconciling power. But should this potential danger actually prohibit innovative mission designed to reach those untouched by a parish's existing ministry? This challenge about the breadth of Christian unity and reconciliation in a locality cuts in a number of directions. It challenges the existence of different denominations in the same locality, pressing each towards the goal of Christian unity now. But it does not make their present existence illegitimate. The call to unity through the gospel equally challenges any local church whose membership is not truly representative of the breadth of its community. Christ's reconciling work requires us to take initiatives to reach those who would otherwise remain untouched. In other words, the reconciling work of the gospel will demand fresh expressions of church in some contexts!

Christ's reconciling work also requires us to take the full complexity of locality and community seriously. It is more than, but not less than, a geographical space. It involves the whole of the cultural reality and multiple layers of contemporary community. Most fresh expressions are extensions of a parish's ministry in order to meet the demands of the breadth of Christ's reconciling work. Some are deanery or diocesan initiatives established for the same purpose. Those which seem to be targeted on a niche group are establishing a beachhead which they hope to develop into a broader mission. Catholicity demands diversity. *Mission-Shaped Church* quoted Paul Avis of the Church of England's Council for Christian Unity:

Catholicity refers to the universal scope of the church as a society instituted by God in which all sorts and conditions of humanity, all races, nations and cultures, can find a welcome and a home. Catholicity therefore suggests that the church has the capacity to embrace diverse ways of believing and worshipping, and that this diversity comes about through the 'incarnation' of Christian truth in many different cultural forms which it both critiques and affirms. The catholicity of the church is actually a mandate for cultural hospitality. [41](#)

Unity in Christ can be expressed in more ways than all being together at the same service at the same time. The local church is more than a gathering for liturgy. There is a dynamic relationship between mission and unity. [42](#) Christ's mission requires us

to take mission initiatives to reach others, even if this provides profound difficulties for the unity of the church. But unity demands real relationship between all of those reconciled in Christ. This may be through membership of the same worshipping community or it may be through real relationship and practical partnership between congregations. The 'mixed economy' provides one tangible expression of unity in diversity. It requires a mutual partnership between inherited models of church and fresh expressions of church.

For the Parish tends to dismiss statements which contradict its reading of fresh expressions as being 'token'. This colours the way it engages with the concept of a 'mixed economy church', regarding it as 'segregation' rather than partnership (x). Properly understood, the mixed economy is about the interdependent partnership between the traditional ministry of the parish and its extension through fresh expressions of church. Difference can be a resource for a more representative unity.

6. A flight from tradition

The authors use their earlier accusation, that *Mission-Shaped Church* makes a false distinction between the content of the faith and its forms, as part of their claim that fresh expressions are a flight from tradition. I have made it clear that the report was highlighting the danger of absolutizing the forms of one particular era, as though they were the only forms the faith could take.

The description of a 'Christian Imaginary in the Parish' in the latter chapters of *For the Parish* has many excellent features, but seems to fall precisely into this trap. It also seems embedded in a literary, middle class culture, alien to much of our population, and to be offering an inappropriate one size to fit all. What impresses me, by contrast, about many fresh expressions is the seriousness of their approach to worship, spirituality and discipleship. Many are engaged, at a catechumenate level, with friends with little knowledge of the faith or of the church. Their creative engagement with the traditions of the church for a missionary context is a gift from which we can all learn. [43](#)

Despite the extraordinary statement that 'each fresh expression to be shaped only by the context in which it is planted' (93, claiming to refer to p 20ff of the report), *Mission-Shaped Church* is quite clear that a fresh expression takes shape through 'the engagement of church and gospel with a new mission context'. [44](#) This 'three-way conversation' is also outlined in the theology chapter. [45](#) This is not a 'flight from tradition' but an interaction between the creeds, existing church traditions and new context, to shape the next variant of the tradition, often drawing from previous tradition for a missional purpose.

Deeper differences: Contrasting approaches to gospel and culture

Underlying the disagreement between fresh expressions practitioners and the authors of *For the Parish* are two different approaches to engaging contemporary culture with the gospel. [46](#)

For the Parish appears to promote the local church as a parallel alternative community, whose practices shape Christian disciples for their ministry in the other culture. As such the parish church acts as 'a politically charged act of resistance to the forces of the age' (89). This is a noble aspiration and I wish it were typical rather than an ideal in most parishes. It might have been more easily achieved during the height of Christendom, but the post-Christendom context in which we now minister makes it more likely that such a strategy would develop orthodox sects, detached from the majority of their communities.

The major concern which underlies *For the Parish* is that 'the Church of England has a choice between its call to 'evangelize the whole country or decline into a sect' (vii) . Those who work in fresh expressions identify exactly the same challenge, but have a different strategy to address it, by establishing fresh expressions of church as a transforming presence among those untouched by existing parish ministry, but which partner inherited approaches, rather than compete or act independently of them.

As a result of its implicit understanding of the relationship between gospel and culture *For the Parish* sees the planting of fresh expressions of church for unreached groups and networks as itself a capitulation to consumerism. In contrast, *Mission-Shaped Church* sees it as the necessary starting point for transformative mission. This is the classic missiological debate about engagement and syncretism which is a necessary part of any new missionary engagement.

These contrasting approaches involve different readings of contemporary culture. This is not the contrast which is assumed by *For the Parish*, the contrast between a neutral culture waiting to be a new set of clothes for the gospel and a transformative set of traditional Christian practices. It is the contrast between a totally negative view of contemporary culture and a more nuanced one which sees both the image of God and our human fallenness in our current cultural forms.

For the Parish accuses fresh expressions of 'a thorough going embrace of postmodernity' (117). Its view of postmodernity is wholly negative, while its view of postmodernism is 'cautiously enthusiastic' (117). I take limited issue with both of these perspectives. Postmodernism as a 'way of thinking' is a powerful tool to undermine the claims of Enlightenment rationalism. Its analysis of power in particular resonates with a Christian understanding of human sinfulness, but it is corrosive of truth claims, including Christian ones, and is potentially as toxic as it is helpful. Postmodernity is the (disputed) academic descriptor of the 'present cultural situation in the West', but it is an academic term. In sociological terms it is an abstract 'ideal type' which oversimplifies a complex phenomenon in order to make certain key aspects of it clear. *For the Parish*, quoting Graham Ward, identifies these as 'the commodification of all values' (117). I agree - commodification, in the form of consumerism, is the primary idolatry of our time and its narrative of human life is not compatible with the Christian narrative. But the actual ways of life by which ordinary people form relationships and make do in western culture are not all shaped so simplistically. New forms of communication, for example, make new forms of community possible. The interconnectedness of the world brings changes for good as well as for evil. Human beings, made in the image of God show themselves capable of rising above selfish ideologies, as well as conforming to them. A longing for more than a commodified culture is latent in many of our fellow citizens.

The examples which *For the Parish* offers in its 'Christian Imaginary in the Parish' (chapter eight), are precisely the fruit of a discerning, transformative approach to an earlier age of pagan culture, 'following the deep truths of pagan religion to which Christianity gave hospitality' (175). We read that 'long ago the Church "baptized" May celebrations' (177). I have little difficulty with the proposals in this chapter. That is because they illustrate the fruits of the sort of discerning engagement with contemporary, rather than ancient rural, culture which *Mission-Shaped Church* advocates. How can this be an inspiring model from the history of Christian mission in the Britain of a previous era yet an unacceptable practice when the Church engages with today's culture?

The Fresh Expressions initiative is a response to two aspects of cultural change. The first is simply the distance that now exists between much of the population and the church. This is the combined consequence of post-Christendom and postmodernity. For a national church it results in a call to innovative mission which 'goes to' those who are now culturally far away, as a participation in Christ's continuing mission. The second is consumerism which is our culture's current form of idolatry. This calls for a counter-cultural discipleship which demonstrates an alternative and better way of living made possible in Christ. *For the Parish* identifies the latter without engaging the former.

It may well be time for a rigorous debate on ecclesiology, and on the relationship between gospel and culture, but not in the context of a caricature of fresh expressions.

Shared Concerns

Despite the detailed challenges I have made in response to the critique of *For the Parish*, there are a number of shared concerns which hopefully could provide the basis for constructive conversation. I will make brief mention of three.

Firstly I am as much 'for the parish' as authors Andrew Davison and Alison Milbank. I have spent thirty-five years of ordained ministry as a parish priest, as a college principal training ordinands as parish priests, or exercising episcopal oversight for parishes. The future health and vitality of its parish churches are vital for the Church of England's mission in the nation. The nature and scale of recent cultural changes in the West make both fresh expressions of church and vibrant parish ministry essential. There is no mixed economy without vibrant parishes. It has never been the intention of the Fresh Expressions Initiative to make parochial ministry seem second rate.

Secondly, *For the Parish* rightly recognises the seductive and corrosive nature of consumer culture and calls for transformative patterns of ecclesial life and discipleship. The ultimate test of the ministry of any Christian congregation lies in the quality of disciples being formed through the patterns of its ongoing life and ministry in Christ. This applies equally to fresh expressions and to inherited patterns of church life. The centuries of Christendom have not made the average parish congregation a prophetic counter-statement in their community. When a fresh expression is planted within the culture of a group with no connection with the church, there is a danger that, in our eagerness to be 'relevant', the costly challenge of the call of Christ might be downplayed. It is clear that consumerism and a consumer mindset offer the major challenge to the church's ministry, whether 'fresh expression' or traditional parish

congregation. The task is to develop congregations within our consumer society but not shaped by consumer values.

Over-familiarity with church culture can at the same time blind churchgoers to how strange and alien the culture of the church is to an increasing proportion of the population. The challenge to many traditional parish congregations is that if no effort is made to create a bridge to people unfamiliar with the Bible or with church, there will be no contact at all.

Thirdly, discipleship requires the formation of Christian character through spiritual disciplines. Traditional Christian disciplines are essential. The centuries of Christendom have left the Church with many congregations whose faith is more a matter of national culture than profound Christian formation. Discipleship can be shallow among regular churchgoers.

Spiritual disciplines are also essential to fresh expressions of church. They have to be established in new, more informal settings, with people with little active knowledge of the faith. As a consequence there is significant interest in 'new monasticism' and appropriate rules of life. ⁴⁷ Missional Orders are coming into being to sustain practitioners, and rules or rhythms of life developed for the formation of new Christian disciples.

Fresh expressions of church are not about abandoning inconvenient traditions. They are about proclaiming and embodying the ancient faith 'afresh' in a new, profoundly challenging context.

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Endnotes

1 Davison and Milbank 2010

2 Church of England 2004

3 All page numbers in the text refer to *For the Parish*

4 See Church of England 2004, Chapter 5, (especially footnotes 1-4 on p 156). The two reports drawn on are Church of England House of Bishops 1997 and Church of England Mission Theological Advisory Group and Churches Together in Britain and Ireland 2002

5 Church of England 2004: xi

6 This is contradicted by Alison Milbank at Davison and Milbank 2010: 154, 227

- 7 The quotation above is practically the only reference to deanery and diocese as units for mission in *For the Parish*. The parish church is treated as the stand-alone agent of mission without addressing the potential of partnerships or wider strategy
- 8 Church of England 2004: 91
- 9 Church of England 2004: 97
- 10 Wright and Sugden 1990
- 11 See particularly Sanneh 1991 and Walls 2002
- 12 For example, Church of England 2004: xi, 80, 90f
- 13 Church of England 2004: xii
- 14 Church of England 2004: xii-xiii
- 15 Church of England 2004: 82
- 16 Quotation from Volf 1996: 25
- 17 John 12:32
- 18 Church of England 2004: 87-8
- 19 Quotation from Newbigin 1986: 7
- 20 Quotation from Lyon 2000: 145
- 21 Church of England 2004: 91-2
- 22 Quotation from Balthasar 2004: 113
- 23 Church of England 2004: 85
- 24 Church of England 2004: 85 quoting Torrance 1996: ix
- 25 Quotation from Church of England House of Bishops 1997: 35-6
- 26 Church of England House of Bishops 1997: 16 quoted at Church of England 2004: 95
- 27 See, for example, Davison and Milbank 2010: 55
- 28 Such language is evident in, for example, Anglican-Reformed International Commission. 1984, Council for Christian Unity. 1992 and Church of England House of Bishops 1997
- 29 Newbigin 1989: 119 referenced in Church of England 2004: 34 (not p43 as claimed in *For the Parish*)
- 30 Hull 2006
- 31 Church of England 2004: 89
- 32 The phrase is used, quoting Rowan Williams, in Davison and Milbank 2010: 50 at footnote 23
- 33 Church of England 2004: 86
- 34 Davison and Milbank 2010: 75-81
- 35 See Lings 2011 in this issue of *Anvil*
- 36 Church of England 2004: 113-15
- 37 Church of England 2004: x, 150 (footnote 3)
- 38 For a lucid exposition of this see Walls 1996: 26ff
- 39 Hooker 1996
- 40 For a theological rationale for 'Incarnational Missiology' see Langmead 2004
- 41 Avis 2000: 65 quoted at Church of England 2004: 97

42 See Newbigin 1977

43 This is explored in a forthcoming book by Michael Perham and Mary Gray-Reeves, 'The Hospitality of God: Emerging Worship for a Missional Church'

44 Church of England 2004: 21

45 Church of England 2004: 91

46 The classic text is Niebuhr 1952 recently discussed in works such as Carson 2008 and Carter 2006. See also Bevans 2002

47 See Cray, Mobsby, and Kennedy 2010