

book review: *Church for Every Context*

Michael Moynagh with Philip Harold (SCM Press)

The book claims to be an academic reflection on the phenomena of 'new contextual churches' that addresses some of the critics and provides a theological foundation for further reflection. Church plants, fresh expressions, missional communities etc. are all reminders that over the past few decades, the inherited church has been trying to move outside its walls and attempt to engage with those who don't gather within them. Like the seeds of the sower, some have flourished while others have withered or had the life choked out of them.

Michael recognises the valid criticisms that have been levelled against some of the new contextual churches: Are they fully church? In the desire to be contextual are they still faithful to the gospel? What is their relationship to Christian tradition? Is it spiritual consumerism? Etc. He then seeks to address them. It is a major piece of work beginning with some serious reflection on how commentators view the past and present models of missional communities with plenty of factual information and relevant quotes.

Its second part looks at a theological rationale for new models searching for a working definition of what we mean by something being fully church and the relationship between ecclesiology and mission. He moves on to explore which models of contextualisation the church has used in the past, whether culture specific churches are legitimate and whether it is possible for a new contextual church to be faithful to tradition while connecting with emerging cultures. The third and fourth sections are about launching new churches and bringing them to maturity.

The book isn't an easy read, but it is very informative – drawing from many traditions and authors and tending to invite the reader to pose the right questions rather accept given answers. It is a realistic book that has an honesty about the current situation and this in itself is genuinely informative. But more than information, the author is attempting to help practitioners shape a theological understanding of what it means to be a new church and because of this, you will need to read the book with a willingness to do some work, reflection and prayer on the way.

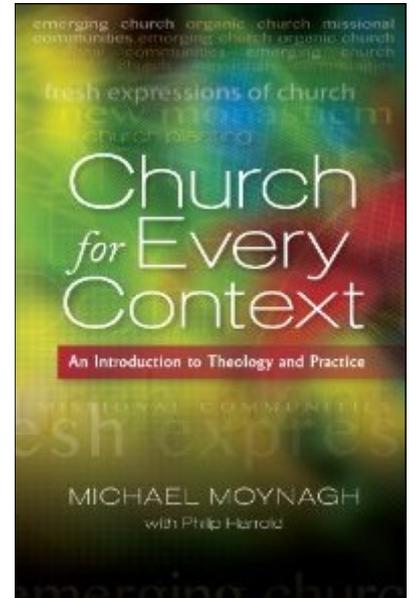
It appeals to us to live comfortably with a mixed economy of church that is both reaching out and staying centred; connected to our heritage while engaging with our culture and being accessible at the same time as being prophetic. If we think that this is too much to ask, this book says it is a challenge that the church has always needed to be ready to rise to.

Here is one of my favourite quotes:

'It is widely recognised that churches in the West cannot go on as if nothing has changed outside their doors. Over the past half century a cultural blizzard has transformed their landscape and the church must engage with the world as it now exists.'

This book is for anyone who is planning or leading a church plant, fresh expression or mission community. You probably won't read every word, but the ones that you choose have every possibility of taking your thinking and planning to a deeper and more secure place concentrating not only on the task in hand, but the theology underpinning it, that will protect it from withering and enable it to multiply.

I enthusiastically commend it to you.



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