Book Reviews

Michael Moynagh


This comprehensive book is a genuine follow-up to Moynagh’s equally detailed 2012 work, *Church for Every Context* in which he develops his arguments and places them within a new conceptual framework. There is no duplication; the elements that he also discussed in *Church for Every Context* have been updated, revised, and set within this new framework. Moynagh has established himself as the authority and one of the leading thinkers regarding new forms of church, and this book is his most developed approach so far.

Moynagh intends the book to be for three audiences: those who reflect on the church’s life; people who lead and encourage new forms of church, and traditional church planters. In reality the depth of thinking here goes far beyond what may be required by a practitioner, unless they specifically want to think on or study their practice more deeply. For an in-depth initial overview of the theology of new forms of church, *Church for Every Context* is probably a better place to start. In that book, Moynagh traces how missional thinking developed regarding fresh expressions and new forms of church up to and since the publication of the influential Church of England report, *Mission-Shaped Church* in 2004. He brings the thinking together, critiques it, and develops his own conclusions.

In *Church in Life*, Moynagh advances the argument in two important ways. First, he examines the discussion of new forms of church through a conceptual framework based on complexity thinking. Using the innovation framework of dissatisfaction, exploration, sense-making, amplification, edge of chaos, and transformation, he encourages the reader away from thinking of church development in terms of linear progression. Each stage overlaps or may operate

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in parallel, reflecting the reality of how innovation happens both inside and outside the church. These can be useful paradigms for a founding team as they analyse what has brought them to start a new initiative (dissatisfaction with the existing state), explore new possibilities, make sense of them theologically and contextually, draw others in (amplification), tread the fine line between seeking stability and continual innovation (edge of chaos), and gradually see transformation in the people or cultural landscapes in which they are operating. This can be a helpful framework for those empirically studying such churches.

Also pervading the book is Moltmann’s theology of hope, drawn from his 1967 work of the same title, which moves the conversation of contextual churches from incarnation to eschatology highlighting God’s in-breaking of His future reign into the present.\(^2\) With confidence based on God’s promises and future possibilities, hope spurs the innovator into action acting as a catalyst for innovation: ‘The coming kingdom contains possibilities for natural and human flourishing. Imagining these possibilities creates dissatisfaction with the current state of the world. Through the Spirit, this dissatisfaction breeds a desire to bring the kingdom closer’ (p. 63). This theology alongside his innovation framework provides a theological and pragmatic rationale for new ecclesial communities.

Secondly, Moynagh focuses on relationship as the key driver for new forms of church. In *Church for Every Context*, Moynagh developed the phrase ‘new contextual churches’ to describe the wide variety of forms of church that are emerging, bringing together in a single phrase the multitude of language that has been used on the subject, ‘fresh expressions of church’ to emergent. These new contextual churches had four elements. They were to be missional, mainly started by Christians but intended for those who did not usually attend church. They were contextual, aiming to ‘fit the culture’ of the people they are intended for. They were formational, with the intention of making disciples. And they were ecclesial, intending to become church for the people of that context.\(^3\)

In *Church in Life*, Moynagh maintains the four elements but develops a new phrase: ‘new ecclesial communities’. This focuses the discussion on the relationships within the ecclesial community rather that the practices or structures of it. This phrase also circumvents the question of whether these communities are legitimate church. He does approach this question in a later chapter, but to

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\(^3\) Moynagh (2012), p. xiv.