

‘The message of this book will offer encouragement to many who hope for a Church that is increasingly collaborative, and one where clergy and laity can operate with mutual respect. Robin Greenwood’s familiar forward-looking voice discusses theological and practical issues, exploring possibilities and suggesting alternative approaches. He advocates distinctive roles for priests and for other laity, pointing towards some ways in which expectations of clergy contributions might be re-envisioned, and interdependent relationships developed. Those who want the term “the Body of Christ” to become more than an oft-repeated phrase will find the book raises numerous core questions and ideas for reflection!’

Joanna Cox, National Adviser in Adult Education and Lay Development

‘Robin Greenwood draws on an immense amount of practical experience in this short book. He writes with theologically informed realism about the life of the local church. There is much here to encourage and hearten all who care about the future of parish ministry.’

Nicholas Sagovsky, Whitelands Professorial Fellow, Roehampton University

‘For some time now I have thought that “virtue ecclesiology” might have something important to offer to the Church in its continual task of re-inventing itself. In this book, Robin Greenwood provides a demanding and thought-provoking theory–practice synthesis, drawing particularly on the work of the moral philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre. The creative identification of the core practices of the local church, the virtues that are required to support these practices, and the importance of institutionalizing these practices both locally and in the wider Church in a way that is both faithful and life-giving, provides a novel way of thinking about Church as organization. There is much here that will help with down-to-earth practicalities, but set within a framework that will reward sustained reflection.’

*Geoff Moore, Professor of Business Ethics,
Durham University Business School, and Reader in the Church of England*

‘When a thoughtful and considered tome is written regarding the reasons for and challenges to “being Church”, it warrants our attention. In Robin Greenwood’s *Being Church*, the question “Where to from here?” is asked. And the responses have far less to do with structures and strategies than they do with living in and through our eucharistic relationships. In my experience and estimation, our relationships and the ways in which “we are together” inform and give shape to our own responses to one another. It is my pleasure to commend this book to you as I believe, using the language of *A New Zealand Prayer Book, He Karakia Mihinare o Aotearoa*, that its words will encourage us “to hear what the Spirit is saying to the Church”’

*The Rt Revd David Rice, Bishop of Waiapu,
Anglican Church in Aotearoa, New Zealand and Polynesia*

‘There are rich learnings here on how the whole body of Christ can be imbued with the values of the kingdom. The movement is from strategies to living out gospel virtues. *Being Church* is brimming with examples of how the people of God can exercise their baptismal calling in full partnership with the ordained. Personally, I was nourished and encouraged by visions and worked examples of lay people growing in discipleship. My own fifteen years’ positive experience of team ministry has been challenged and stretched. As mixed economy and emerging forms of church beg new questions, this book grasps nettles of how “church” is to be worked out, both at the deep level of values or virtues, and at the everyday level of how ministry is shared.’

*The Revd Canon Alastair Macnaughton, Director of Developing Discipleship,
Lindisfarne Regional Training Partnership*

‘Robin Greenwood’s *Being Church* expands our vision of what we as God’s people are called to be and do. This inspiring and insightful integration of theology and practical approaches to ministry speaks to those of us who seek new ways to renew Christian community. This work draws on insights from a variety of disciplines. It bases ministry in the theology of the Trinity and encourages the reader to engage in ministry in a relational and collaborative manner. Diocesan leaders are invited to move from inherited patterns of hierarchy that foster dependency, to a relational way of being Church within the complex reality of the twenty-first century. While acknowledging the tension between the priesthood of all believers and the ordained priesthood, this book offers a fresh perspective that calls us to a new relational and mutually respectful way of working together as the whole people of God. This is a great book to share with my colleagues in ministry development!’

*The Revd Canon Sandra Holmberg, Missioner for Total and Shared Ministry,
The Episcopal Church, Minnesota, USA*

‘Robin Greenwood has long written and reflected on the re-imagining of priesthood in the contemporary Church. This book draws on his recent experience of returning to be a parish priest again, and combines his theological wisdom with a deep reflection on parish ministry. As always, there is delicacy, insight and theological depth, which speaks powerfully to the sense of powerlessness felt by many Christians. The sense of trying to keep alive a vision of hope, while immersed in the struggle to create a Church that embodies Christian wisdom, makes the book very relevant to many clergy.’

The Revd Canon Peter Sedgwick, Principal, St Michael’s College, Cardiff

BEING CHURCH

The formation of Christian community

ROBIN GREENWOOD



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To all who are seeking to be Church for the world's repairing

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About the author

Robin Greenwood is a practical theologian with over forty years' experience as an Anglican priest, educator and writer. He is a member of the Third Order of St Francis and a visiting fellow at St John's College, Durham. He is married to Claire, also an Anglican priest. They have two sons and a daughter and four grandchildren.

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Introduction

In a lost world looking for maps, churches fired by the gospel have a vital role. Confident not in ideals and clarity but in the trustworthiness of relationships formed by God's love, churches can become honest, open, infectious and challenging communities for the sake of humanity and Creation. My purpose here is to encourage Christian communities to revisit their ways of being Church and be present to what emerges through the voice of the Holy Spirit and of society.

The paradox at the heart of the Church's life at present has made this book particularly difficult to write. In the 50th anniversary year of Vatican II, despite the great surge of hope generated by the Council being tempered by many negative experiences of Church, sparks of the fire of the Holy Spirit are still flying. Three kinds of Church especially appear to be flourishing: those that adopt a single vision with a strong articulate leadership, cathedrals offering a glimpse of the numinous, and Pentecostal churches. As we shall explore, hope and despair now go hand in hand in the lives of local churches, lay and ordained ministers, and dioceses or regions of the Church.

On the one hand, dioceses, churches and clergy increasingly speak of mission and evangelism; there is a growing acceptance of the partial truths of all the churches; the number and degree of responsibility of women in public ministries increase; liturgical imagination expands; fresh expressions of Church are now in the bloodstream; mixed-mode ways of being Church continue to be explored; church justice and peace groups display energy; and all God's people are cooperating as never before.

And yet, on the other hand, many churches are low in numbers and energy; many of the stipendiary clergy who have worked stoically for decades are retiring and their successors are working differently; there are increasingly unrealistic expectations of clergy as inherited patterns become unsustainable; multiple-parish arrangements are often causing severe stress to communities and to individuals; raising finance from aging congregations is an increasing source of anxiety; buildings are often a burden; many younger Christians have minimal

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interest in the historic and inherited structures; churches are tempted to retrench and focus on internal rather than local partnerships and kingdom agendas; dioceses stand in urgent need of a new understanding and practice of mission and yet find it extremely difficult to align sufficient energy, resource or volition.

These 13 short chapters present an urgent and sustained questioning of a church culture that evolved in a different world. Chapter 1 presents an operational theology rooted in the desire to live in the deeply patterned order Christians know as Trinitarian relatedness: an intensity of connection with God and Creation. Some who are suspicious of 'mere theory' will prefer to skip this or come back to it later. However, I do invite the reader to recognize the power of ideas interwoven with practice. It has been prayerful and networked wrestling with these theory-practices that has kept me resilient in living for so many decades on the inside of the outside of the Church.

A barrier to some will be my emphasis on the centrality of the Eucharist to Christian practice. Choosing to stand within a liberal Anglican tradition and encouraging a wide variety of liturgical patterns, I cannot imagine a Christian community life not focused on eucharistic celebration. For me this draws together Church as a baptized and baptizing community, as under Scripture and seeking to build goodness into society. From the earliest days of discipleship, Christian communities breaking bread together were formed through the Eucharist, a distillation of the whole of what they had received from Christ. Rather than looking for an impossible settlement that might accommodate everyone, we can choose to receive and celebrate the partial insights of all. Actively celebrating unity in difference is the fiery core of communal Christian belief and living. Some will also point out pragmatically that, with fewer clergy, sustaining a eucharistic focus will be unworkable. If we think we haven't sufficient priestly ministry we're looking in the wrong place.

For the sake of the contemporary world and in response to the leading of the Holy Spirit, for four decades I have dedicated my energy and skills to persuading the Church to re-invent itself. Increasingly I recognize that it is only in the present moment and place, and not in some great future plan, that new meaning, strength and peace are found. My present experience as parish priest has taught me to be less hopeful and less anxious about the future. Our calling is to respond

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to God at work within and through Christian community, formed through the overlapping of activity and stillness.

The Parable of the Sower (Matthew 13.1–23) illustrates the constant call for churches to be propagating seed with abandon, without controlling where it may lead. Matthew knew already how Christian communities emerge from the interweaving of love, despair, delight, failure, rejection, forgiveness, boredom and unexpected bursts of growth. This old yet new corporate Christian pathway binds us together through reason, emotion and faith in transformative practices that enshrine as much of God's desire as we can absorb today.

As I write, sea ice in the Arctic is shrinking to its smallest extent ever recorded (Vidal 2012). It remains to be seen whether we will shrug our shoulders and look forward to greater investment in drilling for more fossil fuels that will exacerbate the global situation. Or will it be a wake-up call to radically different approaches to energy creation? This is a parable for the churches. In this era of 'neo-atheism' and the individual's right to self-expression, to be nominally or passionately religious is equated with a naive loss of rationality or autonomy. The search in this volume is for a re-integrative approach to finding creative theory–practice for becoming Church for our society now.

1

Finding how to be Church again

Key virtues of a God-centred Christian community

We cannot be good shepherds and teachers
unless we are reborn in the Spirit
and allow ourselves to be led by God,
open to the new ways of God and truly open to people.
This means that we are dying to our own ego
and our need to be in control,
but also to our need to rebel and prove ourselves.

(Jean Vanier 2004, p. 80)

Centred on God

Our society is in many ways lost and anxiously searching for where we are on the map. Largely bemused as it is by religious commitment and cynical about faith in a loving God, there are signs of a restless seeking for ways of finding meaning and consolation. In baptism parties, bringing ever more people dressed in their most elegant clothes, we can see their longing for Church to have the pearl of great price, clues to the mystery at the heart of life. In the tragic funeral of a baby, churches humbly stand beside those who are numb with grief or full of anger, offering a uniquely safe space for grief and love. With a mixture of urgency and joy, Christian communities now have a particular opportunity to show hospitality to all who seek God. Christian communities need to remember that we have all the gifts we need to be Church, when we are open to God, to the world, to one another and to ourselves.

Being Church again, now, in the specifics of this place and time, requires a confident, and always searching, presumption of God's existence and of God being of a particular character. Making room for God to be God, and to love God only for God's sake, is central to this exploration. As Paul writes (Romans 8.26), it is the Holy Spirit

praying in us, calling us to the Father, that gives us Christian identity over anything we might do or pray. Knowing God, as truly as we can, guides and corrects our practice of Christian community.

God's nature

The Holy Spirit draws us to know God in the tender intimacy of sons and daughters, painfully refusing to endorse our prejudices or condone our own short-sighted desires.

'A ceaseless outgoing and return of the desiring God' (Coakley 2012, p. 4), is incompatible with a distant patriarchal monologue. To find how to be Church again, in our present context, needs our own hearts to be open to the intensity of God's love. Coakley continues, 'It is the Holy Spirit who "interrupts" my human monologue to a (supposedly monadic) God; it is the Holy Spirit who finally thereby causes me to see God no longer as a patriarchal threat but as infinite tenderness.' Worshipping and living out the mystery of the Trinity moves us beyond merely personal choice. It takes us towards the reciprocally ordered practice of Christian community and a serious but joyful sharing in the search for the flourishing of all people and Creation.

When, in the Eucharist, we say, 'In union with Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit, we pray to the Father', we are describing the transfiguring life of Christian community.

Recovering relational ways of being Church will include at least some of the following elements.

Awareness of ourselves in our present circumstances

Moving beyond abstract theory, being Church demands that we make ourselves as fully present as we dare at this time. Engaging with and praying through this book, alone or with others, and holding in mind the local neighbourhood and churches, readers could ask:

- What are the realities of life here for very different sets of people?
- What difference is the Church making to people's lives in this area?
- What is of value in what I (and my church) do already and what could I change in line with God's purpose?
- In what ways is the Church more of a problem than a resource?
- Where is God's presence apparent here?

Finding how to be Church again

- Where could we join more in God's work?
- What can I personally contribute to a renewed Church?
- How can I be an encourager of those who are younger?
- How can I relieve the Church's anxiety by being more generous financially?
- Where can I help to create conversations that build up hope?
- How will I work or pray for God's Church to become more open and attractive to those who are hungry for hope?
- If I am an innovator already, how can I interweave what I have learnt with others in ways that are mutual and loving?
- How can I work with the people of the third age – the recently retired?
- How can I use people's natural interests to bring them closer to God?
- How can I and my church be more visible and courteously active in the wider neighbourhood?

Church lived in its practices

Gospel practices are social and cooperative, not activities carried out in isolation.

Surely that is why bride and bridegroom, invitations to banquets, and wedding celebrations are Jesus' most common metaphors for eternal life. They imply reciprocity, the give and take of mutual reverence and mutual desire, and most of all, happiness.

(Richard Rohr in Finley *et al.*, 2012)

Unlearning notions of Church as individuals who happen to turn up to services and social events requires a new common awareness, reached through preaching and living together the baptismal calling to be 'in Christ'. To be Church is to be ordered together as companions in faith, tears and joy. In a Church struggling to be 'grown up', from within our varied journeys we must love and tease one another into practices of vulnerability and interdependence. Heroically or lazily to soldier on being Church 'as we've always known it here' is in reality to cut ourselves off from 'Church'. Being Church is to be united within the group of all groups held by Christ and moving at the Spirit's direction in a mutually accountable relationality.

Practices of faith have been passed on from earlier generations, recapitulating time after time in ever new situations, following the way of Jesus since Pentecost. Churches are those who allow ourselves to be drawn towards God's final purposes now, in this moment. How we make ourselves present as Church in this situation tells the story of what we have absorbed of God's desire for the fulfilment of the world and its peoples.

Church for the formation of desire

As Church we are easily tempted to become distracted from our true identity and purpose. We are perhaps harassed by falling numbers, rising damp or too many parishes grouped together and diminishing clergy numbers. We may be disapproving and unforgiving of the behaviour of others. We will surely have disputes among musicians, fight over which version of Scripture to read, or scapegoat those whom we find difficult.

Taking into account the wisdom literature in Scripture and Jesus' own ease with touching, sensuality, tiredness, hunger, grief, anger, celebration, feasting, respect and compassion, we can recover, in our present contexts, Church rooted in God's intensity of love and movement towards us.

The invitation of Scripture is to let God be our primary obsession. Moses' decision to liberate his oppressed people was transformed from the moment when his attention was arrested at the bush that, burning, was not consumed (Exodus 3). He responded in awe; he removed his shoes in worship. God invites us now to stop and turn around, accepting the gift of illumination, our hearts burning and our purposes ventilated by the Holy Spirit. As God communicated to Moses a biased compassion for those in need of liberation, our society needs Church to hear this message and act on it now.

This 'towardness' that Scripture reveals is a reminder of how we are regarded by God and allured into participating in God's own ways with the world. Living in the Spirit, churches recover confidence that in all the mess of human interrelating, the central truth is that we are desired by God. As we become so assured, we grow in the self-esteem that allows us to participate in God's own desires. We also grow in confidence to let go of old securities and transcend our previous certainties.

Rowan Williams speaks of this movement in terms of going beyond what we used to hold as 'theologically correct' and so discerning a development in our belief. He describes this as a centring on the cross of Christ so that it may in turn permeate our ways of exercising and receiving authority. This movement is 'a steady and endless enlarging of the heart through union in prayer and virtue with the Word, which is also a steady and endless growth in knowledge of the Father' (Ford 2007, p. 220).

The interplay between desiring and receiving God's promises for the work of God's people is a core theme in the book of Revelation. Churches are invited to enter into God's knowledge, judgement, instructions, guidance, encouragement and promises. In learning what it is that God offers, churches are encouraged to receive these blessings as the most direct way of discovering their transformed identity. Their ultimate calling is for their names to be linked with the name of Jesus himself (Revelation 3.11–12). Directed by the Spirit, embraced by the Father, with all nations, in intimacy with Jesus in a meal-centred community, such churches can reveal to the world their most profound potential for the world's healing.

Called to unity, holiness, catholicity and apostolicity

Every genuine practice of Church is connected to every other. In the accumulated experience of the Church this is to become united, learn holiness, choose catholic order and learn to be apostolic. Whether in a cathedral or in 25 parishes held in plurality, being Church is Christian community that has certain characteristics:

- Being Church is being *united* as God's people (Psalm 133.1–3), celebrating difference, held up in prayer and learning God's many-layered wisdom and ministering from the Spirit's gifts (Ephesians 3.10). Such a church will offer hospitality, living out of God's abundant generosity, welcoming everyone, of any age, at all times and growing as God's people, for ever linked with the name of Jesus Christ (Ephesians 1.17–18 and 4.1–6).
- Being Church is desiring and learning *holiness* (Isaiah 6.3; Revelation 4.8). To desire holiness is to respond to the call of God to the people of God to be like God (1 Peter 1.14–16) in goodness and beauty (Psalm 19.7–10). The priority will be the transformation of

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