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THE HOSPITALITY
OF GOD

*Emerging worship for
a missional Church*



Mary Gray-Reeves and Michael Perham

SPCK

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The Hospitality of God
is dedicated with gratitude
to the pioneering Christian leaders
creating emergent communities
and fresh expressions of church

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*+Mary Gray-Reeves
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1

A pilgrimage of grace

The creation of this book has been a journey of discovery. What might have been a series of tiring journeys up and down England and across America turned out to be more like a pilgrimage of grace. This book requires rather more of an introduction and explanation than some. How has it come to be written? This chapter, by way of a preface, different in style and content from the others, sets the scene and describes the process.

The story begins at the Lambeth Conference in Canterbury in July 2008. Three bishops, Mary Gray-Reeves, Bishop of El Camino Real in California, Gerard Mpango, Bishop of Western Tanganyika in Tanzania, and Michael Perham, Bishop of Gloucester in England, sat down together and agreed to invite their dioceses to form a three-way ‘companion relationship’, a partnership that would work intentionally for the holding together of the Anglican Communion, by deepening friendships that would enable people to live together with difference, sometimes profoundly challenging difference, and not to walk away from one another. Through the autumn of that year negotiation by email produced an agreement and the partnership came into being on the First Sunday of Advent 2008. During the following year teams, led in each case by the bishop, visited each other’s dioceses. There was a lot of prayer, worship, Bible study, attention to context, food, conversation and friendship. And the God of surprises was at work.

The nature of that partnership is still emerging and developing. We believe we have found a way of relating that other groups of dioceses might follow. We are learning how to model that mix of honesty, openness, challenge, patience, hope, trust and affection that allows us to flourish with integrity in our diversity. The unity of the Anglican Communion remains one of our primary partnership objectives, as this worldwide diverse body seeks to negotiate – intact – the all-encompassing social, political, economic and religious changes of the world.

Because of our approach to the partnership, which is designed to be in tune with the deep Christian tradition of generosity amid diversity, we have been able to witness God generously enriching our common life, beyond our expectations, enabling us to learn from one another; not least in seeing our own contexts and cultures more clearly for having been open to the contexts and cultures of others. For the teams from El Camino Real and Gloucester, making their first visit to Western Tanganyika, there was the transformative experience of living for a few days in a church where some of the challenges of the modern world, let alone the postmodern world, have not yet had to be faced, rejoicing in its vibrancy, deeply affected by its poverty, energized by its faith and its growth, made more fully aware of how the church is flourishing in Africa, even, in Tanzania, alongside and with respectful coexistence with its Muslim neighbours. For those teams to return home to California and to England was to experience also the contrast between that African confidence and the failure of the churches in the West to reach a postmodern generation that has very little knowledge of the gospel of Jesus Christ or the life of the Church. So, not only the idea for this book but also the collaborative way of working would not have been realized without our triad partnership. The friendship and conversation of its bishops has included this area of engagement with those seeking to tell the good news afresh to a new generation, wanting to see what might be learned from what in the UK have been called 'fresh expressions of church' and in the United States 'emergence churches'. Indeed the culture of the church speaks a different language from that of secular society; and a partnership of sorts needs to be formed if we are going to communicate effectively. This book is born, therefore, of the collaboration of difference: not only cultural, but Michael bringing his knowledge, expertise and gifts for liturgy, Mary offering insights of one highly engaged in issues of culture, both with a passion for good worship and effective mission.

True to emergent form, the churches we visited demonstrated a disciplined ability to live with diversity, content to reach differing conclusions about any number of issues, yet united in worship; and for sacramental communities, united in the Eucharist itself. We found leaders of emergent churches highly collaborative, modelling something of the way our changing world now must work; not everyone to their own preference, but rather finding common ground where diversity is not just tolerated, but understood as normative and not

cause for alarm. Ultimately, of course, at the heart of all emergent churches is a deep desire to be in communion with those seeking God in Christ, receiving people as they come and journeying with them in the life of faith, allowing God's new creation to emerge. In the midst of this work, diversity just *is*.

As relationships are created anew, so is the language that seeks to reflect the new reality. At the time of this writing, the evolving language within the movement included an understanding that *emergence* was a word used to communicate the movement as a whole; that is, such as the word Protestant reflects inclusion of many denominations and a particular way of being church in Christendom. *Emergent* currently tends to reflect churches inclusive in character of all sorts and conditions of people; *emerging* is more representative of churches that are evangelical and conservative in nature. Other descriptive words associated with the movement include Deep Church, Missional Church, Neo-Monastic Church, Hyphenated, Progressive, and others. As the world is changing at a rapid speed, so is the language that attempts to give definition and voice to the massive shifts occurring in every aspect of postmodern Western life. We encourage our readers to resist the urge to become too attached to any one descriptor (because it is likely to change), but rather to increase understanding of our changing world, and discover how the timeless message of Jesus Christ – the one who was, who is and is to come – might be proclaimed in this age.

To that end and because we must use words to write a book, instead of using the double phrase 'fresh expressions/emergent church' over and over again, we have used 'emergent church' most of the time. Readers need to understand that by 'emergent church' we mean that phenomenon in the United States and the 'fresh expressions' movement in the United Kingdom. Because, as is explained below, we focused principally on Anglican and sacramental emerging churches, we did not much encounter the subtly different concept of the 'emerging' church of American evangelicalism.

That said, the intention all along was, at the end of the day, to have written a book that would be, first of all, descriptive. In general, people in the wider Church know very little about the emergent churches, and what they do know, or think they know, can make them cautious or even suspicious. Some stories need to be told and some remarkable communities described, and this book seeks to do that. But, second, there were two questions to be addressed. One of them

turned out to be simple to answer: 'What might the emergent churches learn from the church's liturgical tradition if they were open to it?' This book will develop the answer, but essentially it is this. Of course there is endless resource in the tradition. But the emergent churches are very open to it, perhaps more open than the inherited church. There is no reluctance among emerging churches to search the tradition and to re-energize it.

The other question is more complex: 'What might the inherited church learn from the worship of the emergent churches?' The greater part of this book is devoted to that. There are some easy lessons to learn, recovering some lost arts, investing some ancient forms with new energy, taking some risks. There are also some difficult issues, where to listen to the emergent churches would challenge, at quite a fundamental level, some of the assumptions and the rules of liturgical life in the inherited church. The church needs to begin a dialogue of sorts between itself as institution and its essence as the body of God's salvation, called to proclaim and include all who seek to be part of Jesus Christ, especially those who have no knowledge or understanding of this sacred story.

We needed to set clear parameters to the subject. We clarified for ourselves that we were not looking at alternative services in inherited churches. Clearly many inherited churches that do not think of themselves as 'emergent' are nevertheless becoming open to alternative worship of various kinds. But to have included these would have been far too broad a subject for us to tackle. We wanted to engage with the worship of new churches and of communities which, if they had begun their life within the inherited church, had moved into sufficiently new territory to be emergent churches. In general we stayed with that principle, though we were helped by two powerful experiences in Seattle from within the inherited church that are described in Chapter 6 and in *Worshipping communities* 4 (page 79).

We further clarified that what we were exploring was the worship within these communities. We were not uninterested in other aspects of their life, the extent to which, for instance, they saw themselves as 'missional' communities. Indeed that is, in some ways, more fundamental than anything else to their flourishing. Nor were we focusing on their pastoral care – of their own members or of the wider communities in which they were set – nor on their teaching/learning opportunities outside a liturgical context. Our attention was on their

worship. Inevitably that drew us into related questions, about how they understood community, authority and accountability. We have not avoided these issues, but the worship remains the focus.

There have been two more clarifications. The first has been that we have restricted ourselves to emergent churches that see themselves as Anglican, whether through the Church of England or in the United States through The Episcopal Church. All but two of the churches that we visited were led by an episcopally authorized minister. Of the other two, one was led by a Methodist minister, and even that church was jointly sponsored by the local Anglican diocese. The other sat light to accountability with its diocese, though its leaders had strong roots in The Episcopal Church.

The second has been that we have concentrated on emerging churches where words like ‘catholic’, ‘sacramental’, ‘eucharistic’ and ‘contemplative’ have rung bells. Nine of the 14 communities we write about in this book were celebrating the Eucharist on the day we visited them.

So, in short, this study explores worship in Anglican emergent churches in the sacramental tradition on both sides of the Atlantic, seeking to reveal the liturgical life that unites emergent and inherited churches alike and searching for lessons and insights for all communities, inherited or emerging, that understand themselves to be Anglican, sacramental and open to where the Holy Spirit might lead in the renewal of worship. We would not want to claim that conclusions can be drawn about the emerging church movement in its widest sense from what we saw. Clearly there are other forms of fresh expression, outside the sacramental tradition, about which very different conclusions could be drawn.

Of the 14 communities visited, seven were in England and Michael Perham alone went to share in their worship. These were Sanctus1 in Manchester, Home in Oxford, Ethos @ St Nick’s in Portsmouth, Transcendence in York, Safe Space in Telford, Blesséd in Gosport and Moot in London. He also had conversations with Richard White about Dream in Liverpool, with Jonny Baker about Grace in London and with Michael Volland about Feig in his own diocese of Gloucester. In the middle of the English tour came two weeks in the United States, where he and Mary Gray-Reeves together shared in worship with Transmission in New York, at The Crossing in Boston, at St Gregory of Nyssa in San Francisco, at St Paul’s Church, the Church of the Apostles and St Mark’s Cathedral in Seattle, and at Thad’s in Los Angeles.

We should record here that these 14 communities where we worshipped are very diverse. We worshipped in a Manhattan apartment. We were caught up in the liturgy in cathedrals. We celebrated the Eucharist and received consecrated bread and wine. We were drawn into new rituals with ash and with stones. Most of the communities who welcomed us would describe themselves as ‘emergent churches’ or ‘fresh expressions of church’, but three did not exactly fit that model. St Gregory of Nyssa in San Francisco, although it exhibits many of the characteristics of the emerging churches, predated the emerging church movement by several years, having been founded in 1978. The service of Compline in St Mark’s Cathedral in Seattle, for all its attraction to what is sometimes called Generation Y or ‘Gen Y’ (those born from the 1980s), is a deeply meditative liturgical form; to share in it felt like participation in the worship of an emergent church community. St Paul’s Church in Seattle regards itself as a ‘progressive Anglo-Catholic church’, and though it has its own alternative worship the service we attended was in no way alternative, but a deeply spiritual eucharistic celebration of the inherited church. We have included it in order to have a good model of mainstream liturgical life to set alongside what is developing in the emerging churches. ‘Anglo-Catholic’ in the United States, it should be noted, has a different ring to it from how the term is used in England. In England it has been almost entirely captured by those opposed to the ordination of women. At St Paul’s the rector is a woman and the community is inclusive, exemplifying that such a characterization is not typical in the American expression of Anglicanism.

In each of our visits the method was to share in worship, and to be, as far as possible, worshippers, rather than observers, very rarely writing anything down during the worship, but participating fully. Afterwards (or sometimes before) there were long conversations with the leaders of each community, who were generous with their time and open and honest, as well as motivated and enthusiastic, about their communities and their worship. Everything was then recorded in some detail – a general description of the church and its life, a detailed description of the liturgy in which we shared, some reflections on the experience, and a record of the conversation with the leaders.

Where we went together to visit a community in the United States, we talked much together, questioning, making connections, modifying each other’s insights. There was a lot of animated conversation!

We employed a similar approach with the material from the communities in England. Although it was Michael alone who visited them, we have so pored over the reports together that they too feel like co-authored work. It is for this reason that we have felt able to use the plural ‘we’ throughout the following chapters. We have worked together sufficiently on this material for us both to own the whole experience and the conclusions that are drawn. Furthermore it is true that emergent communities in both countries collaborate, demonstrate similar worship trends and processes of reflection, making our own collaboration relatively easy.

Some of the material in those 14 accounts has found its way, almost unedited, into this book. The majority of it formed the raw material for the conversations reflected in the book.

The different cultural contexts of our two churches and the nations within which they minister have meant that there have inevitably been moments when finding the right word or phrase has been difficult, with the danger that we might be misunderstood in either an English or an American context. We have tried quite hard to express things in a way that will communicate clearly on both sides of the Atlantic, and where we have been aware of significant differences of language and culture, to signal those differences. On a few occasions we have struggled; despite a common language and shared admiration for what the emergent churches are modelling, there were moments when reaching agreement on what to say tested our determination to produce an agreed text, but that is what we have achieved. We have learned a lot about each other’s mind. Working patiently to understand the other’s mind is, of course, what is desperately needed, not only in relationships between the inherited and emergent churches, but between Anglicans in different cultures.

In passing, it is worth noting that the way this book has been written, drawing on our common experience and the material we wrote together, but then refining with drafts going from one to the other by email and editing conversations by skype, is itself an expression of a new way of working that is part of the fast-changing culture in which the church seeks to minister.

Of the 14 churches where we worshipped, we have provided here detailed descriptions of six, in order to give our readers the flavour of the places we have visited and real insight into their worshipping life. This does not mean that these six are more interesting or important

than the others, which do not have a whole section of their own but feature instead through references throughout the book. Every one of the 14 taught us something. Some of them moved us deeply and touched our souls.

The shape of the book is that the 12 chapters have interleaved between them either (in six cases) the account of a particular church community or (in five cases) some striking liturgical texts we met on our travels, texts created in a particular community for that community. They show something of the quality of writing within these churches and also the theology the communities want to embrace and share.

The title of this book, *The Hospitality of God*, reflects what has seemed to us to be a major emphasis of the emergent churches, laying stress on God's desire to be welcoming, hospitable, inclusive, inviting. For ourselves, wherever we went we encountered something of that unconditional hospitality, reflected in the communities and especially in their leaders, giving of themselves generously to us. We found them to be deeply impressive Christian ministers, of high intellectual calibre and mature faith and spirituality: pioneering adventurers, whom the church should honour.

But alongside the hospitality we sensed the spirit of pilgrimage. In that spirit, it was clear that emergent churches were most interested not in the political divisions of the Anglican Communion but rather in embarking upon a journey of creating a collaborative conversation between faith in Jesus Christ and the secular culture in which we live today. In this sense, we found emergent churches prophetic to the institutional church: demonstratively inclusive of those who do not know Jesus, able to readily hear and converse with their experience, participating in the making of a new creation, a new church, born of a relationship between faith and the local context of the world in which we live. Here were people on a journey, uncertain in many cases where it was God wanted these churches ultimately to be, but confident that Jesus was with them on the journey, was blessing them through the events of the journey and would bring something good, exciting and renewing for the whole Church out of the adventure in which they were engaged. We caught something of that spirit, so that far from tiresome journeys on motorways or aeroplanes we found ourselves on a pilgrimage, one in which we experienced many moments of grace, bringing us to a new place, more capable of proclaiming good news in this new age.

Worshipping communities 1: Transcendence

York – 14 February 2010

Transcendence is an offshoot of Visions, a fresh expressions community that has existed in York since 1992, though there were some years of germination before that within the St Michael le Belfry Church community. The Visions community, which meets weekly in St Cuthbert's Church, numbers about 20 and has done so throughout its existence. Its leader until the summer of 2010 was Sue Wallace, who has been involved since the beginning and, after theological training at Mirfield, was ordained in 2006. She has been supported financially by the community.

Transcendence was begun in 2007. While St Cuthbert's was undergoing renovation, Visions made use of the crypt of York Minster. Building on that and identifying a gap, Transcendence was born as a series of alternative worship events that took seriously the building, spirituality and liturgical style of the Minster. Sue was the lead-player in this, but working with Jeremy Fletcher, then the Precentor of the Minster.

Transcendence happens in the Minster once a month on a Sunday at 7.30 p.m., normally in the Chapter House but usually breaking out into other parts of the building at some points during the worship. There were about 150 people present on 14 February, and that is apparently typical, with a wide age range, children through to very senior citizens. Most had the look of people used to sharing in liturgy. Most, we suspected, had other church allegiances.

Sue has had some hope of there being a Transcendence community, but at present it remains an event generated by Visions. It may well be that Transcendence is too big and public to be a fresh expression of church and will remain an alternative worship event parented by both Visions and the Minster community.

This was in many ways traditional catholic liturgy. All the signs of catholic liturgy were visible – altar, three ministers in vestments, candles, Book of the Gospels, incense, well-choreographed ceremonial. The Gospel procession, described in Chapter 5, from the Chapter House into the main church was a beautiful corporate experience. If it was a fresh expression of worship, it was one that drew deeply on the tradition. There were novel elements, of course: icons and two

screens for projected words and images. Musically and visually it was very different from an old-fashioned High Mass, and seating was in the round and on chairs, with some beanbags. But what made it effective were not the novel elements, but the sheer love, energy and gentle confidence that went into the entire celebration.

There seemed to be so much that had gone into it that we wondered whether it would be sustainable on a weekly basis. Is what makes liturgy in many churches flat the sheer hard work of producing something that refreshes the tradition every single week? Sue thought not. The music and the visuals, where most of the work would appear to be required, are not created *ex nihilo* each time, but rather there is a huge bank of material that has been built up over the years and can be reused.

The question, of course, is whether a great liturgical event, with a crowd of people, can turn into an emergent church. There must be circumstances in which it can, but Transcendence does not seem to be of the kind that will. It will go on being a powerful event and it may indeed be for some people the one setting in which they experience church, but it will not be a community. It will be one of the Minster's congregations, probably the one with the widest age range and greatest vitality, inspired and enabled by the Visions community, and that is a very good thing to be.

2

Revisiting Anglican principles

There is a widespread suspicion in the inherited church that the emergent churches within Anglicanism do not take canon law in relation to worship, or indeed the whole ethos of Anglican liturgy, seriously. We found that there were some quite important areas where the emergent churches are at variance with the rest of the church, but the overall picture was, to our mind, one where, consciously or unconsciously, emerging church leaders and congregations were working very much with the flow of Anglican liturgical principle and practice.

In this chapter we have set out 20 such principles. They are not an official set of rules, approved by any province, but they will be accepted by Anglicans both in the UK and in the United States as ways in which Anglican worship can be recognized. Many of them are not, of course, unique to Anglicanism, and not every one of them would be embraced by all Anglicans. But together they build up a picture that is faithful to our tradition. In each case we have recorded very briefly how the emergent churches seem to respond to the principle. In Chapters 4 to 10 we expand those responses in greater detail and with stories of particular communities. At the end of this chapter we add five principles that, though not exclusive to the emergent churches, seem to have prominence and emphasis there.

1 Liturgy is ordered with beauty and holiness to reflect the beauty and holiness of God

With its continuity with the Catholic Church of pre-Reformation days, Anglicanism has always had a concern for worship that is aesthetically pleasing, a beautiful offering to God of all the best that humankind can create. From the time of Archbishop William Laud in the seventeenth century, the phrase from the Book of Psalms, ‘the beauty of holiness’ (Psalm 96.9, AV), has had a particular appeal to Anglicans,

Because of our approach to the partnership, which is designed to be in tune with the deep Christian tradition of generosity amid diversity, we have been able to witness God generously enriching our common life, beyond our expectations, enabling us to learn from one another; not least in seeing our own contexts and cultures more clearly for having been open to the contexts and cultures of others. For the teams from El Camino Real and Gloucester, making their first visit to Western Tanganyika, there was the transformative experience of living for a few days in a church where some of the challenges of the modern world, let alone the postmodern world, have not yet had to be faced, rejoicing in its vibrancy, deeply affected by its poverty, energized by its faith and its growth, made more fully aware of how the church is flourishing in Africa, even, in Tanzania, alongside and with respectful coexistence with its Muslim neighbours. For those teams to return home to California and to England was to experience also the contrast between that African confidence and the failure of the churches in the West to reach a postmodern generation that has very little knowledge of the gospel of Jesus Christ or the life of the Church. So, not only the idea for this book but also the collaborative way of working would not have been realized without our triad partnership. The friendship and conversation of its bishops has included this area of engagement with those seeking to tell the good news afresh to a new generation, wanting to see what might be learned from what in the UK have been called 'fresh expressions of church' and in the United States 'emergence churches'. Indeed the culture of the church speaks a different language from that of secular society; and a partnership of sorts needs to be formed if we are going to communicate effectively. This book is born, therefore, of the collaboration of difference: not only cultural, but Michael bringing his knowledge, expertise and gifts for liturgy, Mary offering insights of one highly engaged in issues of culture, both with a passion for good worship and effective mission.

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