

REPRODUCING CHURCHES



GEORGE LINGS

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The Bible Reading Fellowship

15 The Chambers, Vineyard
Abingdon OX14 3FE
brf.org.uk

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Foreword

This book is a rarity. It has been written by a genuinely reflective church leader who has also been a genuine practitioner. The phrase ‘reflective practitioner’ can all too often mean someone who has thought a little bit about a little bit of life. In George’s case we have a man who has reflected for decades on a long and rich experience of pastoral work, church planting and church growth. You hold the fruit of that reflection in your hand.

Handbooks on church growth are not rare. Nor, sadly, are books persuading us that the growth of the church is mistaken or irrelevant. What George has written is better than both, because it begins in the depths. It takes us deep into the scriptures and into the traditions and fundamental marks of the Church. And it shows us that the Church can indeed be one, holy, catholic, apostolic—and reproducing.

I do promise you that George knows what he is talking about. He has travelled the church for many, many years, listening, questioning, analysing, blessing, consulting and loving the churches he has seen.

As a church planter myself, I remember George’s visit as if it were yesterday. We were working away, doing our best but not entirely sure what we were doing, planting a small-group-based church in an overspill town in Hampshire. When George came, it was as if a man drew alongside us in our thirsty work, opened a case of cold and refreshing water, and helped us to see, as we drank, that what we were doing was theologically rooted and embedded in the traditions of the wider Church, and was fruitful. We returned to our work deeply refreshed. George can do that for you, as you read this book.

You will be given a language to think in, models to consider, scriptures to reflect on and historical examples to learn from. But most of all you will receive a glimpse into the heart of God—that there should be more people knowing Jesus and more kingdom-justice in the world. George has received this heartbeat through his own discipleship, and he will impart it to you.

Be careful! If you catch this vision, you will be empowered and encouraged and provoked to step outside whatever box you may be in, and to walk with God into a delightful, fruitful, reproductive future. You will be on an adventure. You will be on mission. May God bless you on that journey!

Paul Bayes, Bishop of Liverpool

Introduction: why this book?

I hope the title of this book has intrigued you. What was your reaction to its claim that churches should reproduce? Were you delighted, puzzled, surprised, or shocked? You may wonder where such a way of talking came from. Here's my story.

Where do our thoughts come from?

Some say our selfish genes produce our thoughts. Others argue that they arise from the way we grew up. I've heard it all blamed on eating too much cheese the night before. Yet there is another possibility: I'd call it prompts from God. We don't have to believe that these prompts occur independently of the other reasons. God shows remarkable humility in communicating with us. He knows we have mixed motives and limited understanding of his ways. Moments of inspiration can occur while we are seeking him or, equally, while we are quite unaware of him.

I've started the book this way because it goes back to one moment when a surprising thought came to me. I have mainly kept it to myself for over 20 years, but at last I'm daring to make it known. So I am putting the thought, its meaning and its consequences before readers in the wider Church. I'll have to await your verdict on whether the book contains something of truth and value.

Called to observe

The background to my surprising thought is my own history, with its twists and turns. When it came to me, I was serving as vicar of St George, Deal, in Canterbury diocese. My family and I lived there from 1985 to 1997. In the first few months of 1992, I was given a sabbatical. But let me tell you the story that led up to it.

Before then, back in 1984, late in my second curacy, I had become interested in the topic of planting churches. It started when I read the earliest British book on the topic, *How to Plant Churches*, edited by Monica Hill.¹ With a small group of other Anglicans, I began to collect details of examples and invented a simple database to record them. I mentioned the 40 cases that we were aware of in 1987 at the first national Anglican Church Planting Conference, held at Holy Trinity Brompton (HTB). That led to a surprise. The chairman, Revd John Collins, immediately proclaimed me the data collection officer of this barely existing movement. In shock I duly complied. Over the next five years, as the spare-time hobby of a jobbing vicar, I received piecemeal bits of information from around the country.² I presented the patterns I saw in the data to the succeeding conferences for several years.

Back in 1984, I misunderstood what I now see was the start of a more specific vocation. I wondered then whether I was being prompted to begin a church plant somewhere, and was willing to try. Fortunately, all explorations of that route became dead ends. I now doubt if I ever possessed the get up and go, the vision and courage, and the skills to start a church from nothing. I now also look back with horror, mixed with relief, at how ignorant I was about how it is done wisely. We now call these initiatives 'fresh expressions of Church'.

Having become a vicar in 1985, it seemed as though my role was not to start something but to observe others doing it. I tried to track the patterns, variables and dynamics in a new development that, even in 1984, Monica Hill called complex and controversial.

Until recent years those within the Christian tradition have resisted, and some still do resist, any kind of Church planting which introduces new models. Every new expression, from Methodism to Pentecostalism, has received opposition in the past.³

That controversy was particular and tense for the Church of England in 1991–92. Four unauthorised church plants had crossed a parish boundary in a twelve-month period. ‘Invaded’ incumbents publicly protested. An attack on the very parish system was feared. The press loved the controversy.

So we come to my 1992 sabbatical. I visited the four controversial plants. I deliberately widened my experience by visiting cases of good practice both in the UK and in New Zealand. I also studied the limited amount of emerging literature. In the spring, I retreated to the peace of our remote granite-walled Welsh cottage, high in the hills above Blaenau Ffestiniog, to try to write it all up.

What a day!

Curiously, perhaps ominously, it was April Fool’s Day, 1992. I was sitting in a tiny upstairs bedroom, converted into a temporary study by turning the window shutters into a sort of desk. I remember sitting in front of the computer screen trying to make sense of all I had seen and read. I can only say that then a loud thought occurred to me: *God’s Church should and can reproduce.*

Why was that a weird thought, back then? Today’s reader needs to realise that most literature up till then only tackled the practicalities of planting churches. They focused on starting churches, more than sustaining them. The practice was unrelated to any doctrine about the Church, much less how church planting might amend that doctrine. It was novel to think that the very nature of the Church included both the calling and the capacity to reproduce—and to call something ‘novel’ is

pretty close to theological suicide or, at least, highly suspicious. At that time no one made this doctrinal claim. Church planting was only a bold tactical option in local ministry, perhaps done as a response to mission needs. It was not seen as part of Church identity, yet this growing phenomenon⁴ was starting to pose questions about what should be allowed. As I looked in 1992 at some biblical texts, I detected the possibility that scripture broadly supported that bombshell thought which had arrived unbidden.

More surprises

I wrote up the visits I had made and added some biblical and theological comments. The report was sent to my supervisor, Bishop Colin Buchanan, and my diocesan bishop, Archbishop George Carey. So matters rested as I returned to a full parochial life. Over a year later I received a letter. On opening it I must have sounded like Victor Meldrew, exclaiming, 'I don't believe it.' The Archbishop wished to confer upon me a Lambeth MLitt, saying it was for my 'theological contribution to church planting'. There can't be many people who get given an Oxford Masters degree for merely indulging their hobby.

Yet that gift proved more significant than I knew. Because of it, I could apply for my current role in research for Church Army. It gave me the qualification to teach at higher education level. Later, it became the passport to seven years of diffidently tackling a part-time PhD, based at Cliff College under Dr Martyn Atkins.

Since that groundbreaking moment in 1992, I have only rarely aired my thought, which still seemed audacious and unproven. However, I did serve from 1992 to 1994 on the Church of England group that produced the report *Breaking New Ground*. The group drew upon some parts of my sabbatical research, but their report left aside my claim about the Church. Ten years later, I found myself on the working party that produced *Mission-shaped Church*, which came out in 2004. By a twist of history I was asked to write its first draft. In the most directly theological

chapter of the report, I included some biblical material on the calling and capacity for Church to reproduce. The editorial process, rightly conducted by others, kept the heart of that case, showing that the idea was gaining some approval. The chair of the group, Bishop Graham Cray, confirmed that, when the draft was before the House of Bishops, no one took exception to this section.⁵

How do you test your own ideas?

By then I was into the early years of PhD study, completed in 2008. I knew that the possibly crazy idea that had flashed across my mind in 1992 needed testing, but how could I test whether it was true? To suggest an almost novel amendment to Church doctrine, with its 2000-year tradition, is tricky. At the Reformation, such suggestions turned out to be life-threatening, whereas today they are likely only to be dismissed as frivolous. There was another danger: in designing my tests, would I only choose criteria that backed up what I already wanted to be so? I know that when you buy a certain kind of car, you immediately begin to notice who else has been wise and discerning enough to choose the same type. How would I get beyond wish-fulfilment and my prejudices?

I knew I had noticed something that, on the surface, looked intriguing and promising, but did it really have foundations? I needed to dig deeper into scripture, the overall Christian tradition and wider theological thinking. I then got a gift. During my 1992 sabbatical I had learnt to value Avery Dulles' book *Models of the Church*, reading it closely from cover to cover. I returned to it and, beyond the most well-known sections about his six models of the Church, I found what I needed. To my delight, pages 191–92 gave a series of questions deliberately designed to test any proposed new contribution to a better understanding of the Church.

To find this in Dulles' book was so helpful. He wrote his tests years before my idea had occurred. Moreover, he is respected as a Church thinker but from a different tradition to my own, and he had designed

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the tests to appeal across a variety of theological traditions. I could be confident that they were objective enough. I salute their breadth and summarise them for you in the slightly strange order Dulles gives:⁶

- 1 a clear and explicit basis in scripture
- 2 the testimony of tradition—the broader the better
- 3 fostering corporate identity and mission
- 4 fostering virtues and values admired by Christians
- 5 correspondence with contemporary human experience
- 6 theological fruitfulness, thus solving some past problems and lack of linkages
- 7 fruitfulness in relating to those outside the Church

Tests 1, 2 and 6 deal more with the questions of whether the new idea is true and how universal it is. That's why I would have grouped them together. Tests 3, 4, 5 and 7 relate more to practical theology, testing how useful a concept is. 'Is it true?', 'Is it universal?' and 'Is it useful?' are all right and important questions to grapple with when faced with a new idea.

Notice, too, that Dulles' seven tests overlap with the four ways Christians have often decided what is true: scripture, tradition, reason and experience. Anglicanism has long tried to hold the first three together, although we haven't always agreed which was the most important. The role of the fourth factor, experience, is now being taken more seriously. We more freely admit today that our experience is involved in encountering scripture, tradition and reason, but also that experience makes a contribution of its own.

I came, I saw, I wondered

Experience has been important in my story. I feel like a Church equivalent of those explorers who found the first duck-billed platypus. There could be no doubt in their mind that it existed, but what animal family it fitted into was a conundrum, for it defied prior classifications.

Similarly, I was seeing what I could not deny were examples of young churches, but they did not look like the churches that had gone before. There were a load of differences: they not only varied in size, but they could occupy different habitats—different networks and cultures. They held their gatherings in different ways from congregations. They sustained their communities in a diversity of styles. Many were led by unauthorised people. They were at the same time like and unlike what we had known before. Since 1997, my working life has been to visit them, write up their stories and ponder what their existence means.⁷ Since 2012, the Church Army Research Unit, which I lead, has interviewed the leaders of over 1000 of these young Anglican churches, across the breadth of England.

Those experiences obviously showed that further churches can be started, but was it only like Tesco opening a new store or Barclays Bank starting a new branch? Should we understand the start of another church as just the organisational spread of an institution, or could it be different from that? Could we see this widespread phenomenon of ‘fresh expressions of Church’ in a better way? I think it is more accurate and more helpful to see the Church as profoundly interpersonal. One reason is that biblical terms for the Church include phrases like ‘the people of God’ and ‘the body of Christ’. Also, we humans are made in the image of God, and God, as three persons of the Trinity, in some ways resembles a community. So we should think of his Church in communal, interpersonal terms.

Key words act like lenses: they affect everything you see. When we look at the Church through the interpersonal lens, not the institutional one, it changes the way we should talk. New things don’t just start; you might say they are born. The Church does not just expand like a store or bank, where each one is pretty much like the others, only varying in size, like the Tesco Express or the superstore.

Perhaps the best way of talking about this is to say that the Church reproduces. Something organic comes out of it, which inherits the family likeness and yet is also itself. This is how it is with families:

parents remain parents, but their children are both related to and different from them. For me, that picture fitted with what I was seeing, both in my academic study and in my field research. By its nature, or its being, the Church is meant to reproduce, but it does so in a non-identical fashion. If we truly started to think in that way, then seeing fresh expressions of Church come to birth would be entirely normal, with nothing to fear in their difference from their parent body, and much to be applauded. Such a doctrine of the Church makes sense of the creativity we currently see. It explains why these young churches display the variety that we observe. Of course, the question still remains, is this idea true?

Another question I had to face was whether it was legitimate even to pose a fresh way to understand the Church. At that point, Dulles was helpful to me once more. His work, starting in the 1970s, has become a classic text in understanding the Church. He showed that there were a number of different views, which he called 'models'. The number of them, their diversity and their interaction revealed that each one was only part of the overall picture. His work proved that no one model does everything. Each is incomplete. What we need to notice, as well, is that five out of his six ways of understanding the Church have arisen since the middle of the 20th century. Dulles argues that the inherited institutional view was dominant, beginning with the fourth-century Emperor Constantine, but only up till around 1940. The other views represent a rapid and recent rise. Such recent disturbance and diversity indicates ferment. It brings humility and openness to further ways of thinking. Dulles' tale leaves space to add what might still be missing.

So the principle of adding a previously unrecognised idea—that the Church is by nature reproductive—is possible and legitimate. It fits with the creative period in which we find ourselves. But, as only one among a number of incomplete additions to our knowledge about the nature of the Church, it should be judged by similar criteria.

Not overclaiming

I am not claiming that there is a reproductive *model* of the Church to be added to Dulles' list. The claim that the Church is reproductive seeks only to add something to all his models, not to explain the whole of what the Church is. A similar distortion would be to claim that the capacity for having babies, though essential to the future of the species, explains what it is to be human. This book therefore does not offer a full theology of the Church. It is only adding a missing strand of its identity.

Even then, I know that attempting to add, with good intentions, can be fatal. It has always been the case, in cross-cultural work, that the danger of syncretism lurks. Syncretism means to add, but in such a way that the nature of the original substance is compromised. Adding milk or sugar to coffee might not be to everybody's taste but the original drink is still coffee. Adding tea to it might well be syncretism, and adding petrol certainly would be. I am conscious that I am adding to prior views, and I need to show that, in doing so, the essential nature of Church is enhanced, not compromised.

The power of models, images and paradigms

Another reason for using Dulles' tests is that he knows about the power of models and the related words 'images' and 'paradigms'. These are all varying terms that have something in common: they are like a mental lens. Everything you see can be affected by a lens—for example, by using sunglasses, or 'seeing the world through rose-tinted spectacles'. Pick up a particular theological lens and you will see all aspects of Church through this filter. Yet quite often we need more than one way of seeing things.

There is a parallel in scientific understanding. Light is partially understood through complementary models, using analogies of light as a particle and light as a wave. I am glad that Dulles and another scholar of the Church, Paul Minear,⁸ both know how evocative images

are. As Minear puts it, 'To some extent they are self-fulfilling; they make the Church become what they suggest the Church is.'⁹ The advertising industry has known the power of images for years. I recognise that to talk about 'a reproducing Church' is such an image. Precisely because imagery is powerful, and this image of the reproductive Church touches upon its essence, it needs something like Dulles' tests to investigate if it is true. The image exists alongside the thought that the nature of the Church is interpersonal, not primarily institutional. That, too, is a change of image and may even be a change of paradigm, or whole way of thinking, which I will open up in the next chapter.

Obsession with the Church?

I am aware that there is suspicion and distrust of the Church. There are many reasons why such negativity is deserved. I know that some people are much more energised by the call to mission or the values of the kingdom. I will explore in Chapter 11 what could be a good way to relate these three ideas together. I don't rate the Church above the other two, but I do refuse to separate it from them.

You will also find that I make a number of references to the Church of England. I don't think it is the only way to be Church but it's the one I have grown up in. I've researched its practice for a particular reason, though not a very honourable one. The Church of England is reluctant to learn from denominations younger than itself or from outside Europe. It is more open to learning from what it is already doing. That was the view we took when we wrote the report *Mission-shaped Church* and it seemed to help.

Now ponder this reality. It is not an accident that the new things we are seeing are normally called fresh expressions of *Church*. We live at a time when we are reimagining what a local church can look like. I think it is time to have some positive and creative thinking about the Church. This book tries to establish some deeper theological foundations for an understanding of the Church and why it is normal to have fresh

expressions of Church. It goes beyond seeing new churches starting as just a consequence of mission, or as one agent for the kingdom. Unless we can rediscover a positive view of God's purposes for the Church, we will perpetuate an unhelpful, untrue and unwarranted divorce between three intended partners: mission, kingdom and Church.

So read on and decide for yourself:

- Does this idea, that the Church is intended by God to reproduce, make sense?
- Can the idea pass Dulles' tests?
- If true, what does it tell us?

Notes

- 1 M. Hill (ed.), *How to Plant Churches* (MARC Europe, 1984).
- 2 Many came from Revd Bob and Mrs Mary Hopkins, who had a travelling ministry.
- 3 Hill, *How to Plant Churches*, p. 9.
- 4 The number of Church of England church plants begun per year had increased from two in 1982 to 37 in 1992.
- 5 Interview at Canterbury Cathedral International Study Centre, 18 October 2006.
- 6 A. Dulles, *Models of the Church* (Gill & Macmillan, 1988), pp. 191–92.
- 7 Between 1999 and 2012, Church Army published 55 of these extended stories through the *Encounters on the Edge* series. They are still available as PDFs: see www.encountersontheedge.org.uk.
- 8 P.S. Minear, *Images of the Church in the New Testament*, 2nd edition (Westminster Press, 2004).
- 9 Minear, *Images of the Church*, pp. 22–26.

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The useful outworking of the reproductive strand

Three questions

I have tried to deal with three related questions about the reproductive identity of the Church. The chapters on the Bible, the Trinity and Christ all tackled the fundamental question, 'Is it true?' The chapters on the long tradition and the classic four marks of the Church respond to a second question: 'How far is the idea universal?' A third question about the idea is 'Is it useful?' They all matter, but probably in that order.

This third question takes us back to Dulles. Four of his seven tests assess the usefulness of an idea. A very intriguing notion could be true but of absolutely no practical value, which would be a reason to ignore it. An idea could also be useful to those who think it, but dead wrong. Genocide would be a horrible example. Yet, if an idea can be shown to be helpful, enriching and constructive, then it should be made known, encouraged and applied.

Dulles' third test

Dulles' third test is the 'capacity to give Church members a sense of their corporate identity and mission'. Any valuable theory about the Church should provide a framework that aids this kind of self-understanding. This theoretical test complements his seventh, its practical partner. I'll examine test seven immediately after this one.

An obvious resonance

Test three is so sympathetic to the theory of a reproducing Church that readers might think I invented it. Naturally this theory builds the ‘capacity to give Church members a sense of corporate identity and mission’. Research into fresh expressions of Church stories has shown the high priority that young churches place on fostering a corporate identity, which they find has a vital connection to effective mission.¹

Another way the third test is fulfilled is that a young church which grasps this strand of Church identity knows that this is not the end of the process. Its longer aim is to grow to maturity. Within that, by discerning the Spirit’s calling and enabling, it can begin further expressions of Church among yet further groups of people. Reproduction’s dynamic is therefore better thought of as a spiral than a circle; it is an ongoing story, not a complete episode. Reproduction embodies, not just assists, ongoing corporate identity and mission.

Intrinsic linkage of Church and mission

The need and the way to connect two different bits of theology—revived trinitarian understanding and the *missio Dei*—were explained in Chapter 3. Let me take it further.

Past competition and separation

In the past, missiology and ecclesiology became divorced.² This divide between the two disciplines led to unhealthy patterns whereby ecclesiology was seen as a home-based task, focusing on internal issues such as authority, ministerial orders and sacraments, while missiology was done abroad. Material on these subjects was usually delivered in different training institutions. Barriers between the two disciplines have grown. Moreover, in the past, when missions abroad were successful, success was measured by Church values set from home, and the values were often imposed on the local culture abroad. Equally negatively, when a local work stopped being a mission and became a ‘church’, often it ceased being missionary.

Competition for priority between the disciplines has brought distortions. For example, Avis' shorter book on Anglican Church doctrine relegates missiology to one of a number of 'departments or sub divisions' of ecclesiology.³ By contrast, others favour the priority of missiology, like Bosch, who argues, 'Ecclesiology therefore does not precede missiology.'⁴

I am disappointed that today it is possible to read books on one discipline that barely mention the other. Plenty of mission-minded leaders speak and blog, issuing rallying calls to mission, and appear to think that, in their focus on mission, it is both possible and desirable to ignore the Church completely. This is like working for a mission harvest while thinking of the Church as a burning barn. Another distortion is to present encounter with Jesus as something totally separate from belonging to his Church. Others can talk up discipleship as crucial, but without any Church reference. So I was pleased to see the subtitle of Alison Morgan's recent book: 'The plural of disciple is Church'.⁵

Developing a base to hold them together

Trinity seen as 'community-in-mission' insists on an intrinsic relationship between Church and mission, not just a functional connection.

This view of the Trinity helps to resolve tensions between the clashing priorities of missiology and ecclesiology. From this perspective, all are mistaken who think that either missiology or ecclesiology is a subsection of the other. I challenge the claims of some missiologists. It is not just that mission is in the nature of the Church. The reproductive strand makes explicit that Church is in the nature of mission.

Ecclesiology and missiology can be reunited. Both disciplines will be entirely and equally necessary for the birth of further churches and the understanding of existing ones. I was delighted that a contemporary authority in the Church planting field, Stuart Murray, wrote in connection with my 1993 lecture on the topic, 'Adding "reproductive" to the lists of epithets normally associated with ecclesiology such as "one", "holy", "catholic" and "apostolic", might be a significant component in

the integration of missiology and ecclesiology that is important for the health of both disciplines.⁶

Missiology and ecclesiology are more than a complementary pair of foods such as fish and chips. It is better to view them through the fabled question ‘Which came first, the chicken or the egg?’ The two are intimately related and ultimately inseparable. The saying’s point is that it is mad to try to say which came first. All that is certain is that the complete removal of one factor will eventually end the life of the other. I’d claim that no way of thinking about Church and mission, other than the reproductive, holds the two disciplines so powerfully together. It’s a kind of glue, or theological Araldite. Another analogy is to see Church and mission as an excellent marriage. Here are two intimately joined persons, separated only with difficulty, danger and divorce. They belong together, need each other and will grow by mutual loving commitment, valuing their difference within their foundational unity. And their union might lead to children!

Response to a pair of objections

One fear is that my views create a back door into what is called ecclesio-centric thinking—that is, too much emphasis on the Church. I think not, for the following reasons. The trinitarian community-in-mission argument refuses to assert Church over mission, or vice versa. I have also affirmed the priority of the kingdom over the Church, though holding to a significant connection between them through the ‘foretaste’ argument. Eschatology also helps to reduce undue focus upon the Church, by stressing its flawed nature in this age while drawing the Church into God’s greater future. Yet, when the kingdom fully comes, it is the Church that will continue as a community of faith, hope and love. What will cease is mission, as well as many gifts that are useful to it (1 Corinthians 13:8–13), ordained ministry, baptism and even Eucharist.⁷ Thus, a high view of the Church does not need to be an unhealthy self-focused one.

Many of the same arguments answer a second charge, that this theory might make reproduction an end in itself, which is not a new

objection.⁸ Croft rightly raised it over past distortions around the arrival of cell church. He used a relevant analogy, which is that the purpose of marriage cannot be reduced to having children.⁹ Let me state that the reproduction of churches is not the ultimate goal. The Church exists firstly for God the Trinity and then for their wider restorative purposes, of which reproducing is but one calling and means. To have a high view of the Church is not to have a narrow view of its mission.

I think that Dulles' third test is comprehensively passed. In addition to clearly contributing to corporate Church identity and to mission, the special contribution of the reproductive strand is in forging deeper bonds between the two halves of this test. It counters much of the unhappy divorce between ecclesiology and missiology.

Dulles' seventh test

This test, complementing number three, is as follows: 'Fruitfulness in enabling Church members to relate successfully to those outside their own group.'¹⁰ This assesses practice.

Some limitations in the data available

We do now have much more hard data about attendance among the diverse and prolific fresh expressions of Church, in the Church of England. For any depth on this, readers should consult the 2014 and 2016 reports of Church Army's Research Unit. The first report analysed all known examples of fresh expressions of Church in one quarter of the English dioceses. The second repeated the analysis for a second quarter and was able to make further comparisons.¹¹ As a result of that research, I am sure that any working knowledge of the theory of the reproductive strand of Church is still largely limited to theoreticians of the movement, some clergy and trained pioneers. It is not yet widely known by lay leaders or the members of many fresh expressions of Church. We can't say that they acted because they knew this theory.

Relating successfully to those outside their own group

However, we do now know much more about their motives for relating successfully to outsiders. Leaders were interviewed by phone and asked to fit their story into a choice of eight possible motives that we had observed occurring over time. The two most common choices selected were a pair: identifying groups of people culturally distanced from the existing Church, and an attendant desire to diversify styles of Church on offer. The first is more missional and the second more ecclesial. The second is linked to the reproductive strand and its non-identical character. The Christians intuitively sensed a need to start further churches that were different in some appropriate way, including any of the following: a different starting point, a stronger sense of community, a different size of congregation, different dynamics to raise participation, or meeting on different days, in different venues or at different times.

The third most common motive was that they believed that the Church should grow, not by addition but by beginning a further church. In that sense, although the theory of the reproductive Church might be largely absent, the instinct for it was present and has been fruitful in relating to outsiders.

Why is it necessary to relate to outsiders? Imagine your church as a kind of pillar box. There are some great things about it. It has that nice red colour and you can't miss it on the pavement. It is equipped with a sensible rectangular hole at the top for your letters. It even has regular collections (which makes it even more like a church!). However, if you want to post a family-sized bottle of Coke, a giant Toblerone bar or a DVD box set—oh dear, you find they are all the wrong shape.

Today there are people who are interested in spirituality but suspicious of religion. Many have never really met the Church community but are pretty sure it wouldn't suit them; they might not even know where their local one is. In the trade we call them the non-churched. Many others

carry the disappointments and bear the scars they got by belonging in the past, while others have just drifted off as life has changed. We called them the de-churched. There are people from both groups who are discovering that Jesus is brilliant, but they suspect that the Church sucks. None of these people fit the postbox shape of the way into Church.

Another problem is that there are even people who have belonged to Jesus for years but Church is driving them away. They find that its worship doesn't fit with real life, the quality of its community is low, it seems focused on itself, and Christians fall out quicker than Smarties from an open tube.

So, 40 years ago, a slowly growing stream began to flow. Christians began to ask, 'How can we reimagine Church so that it is true to Jesus but is the right shape for those people who don't do Church?' They set off down that path. Then, it was called Church planting. Today, it's seeing the birth of fresh expressions of Church. Our research examined who attended these young churches. We asked the leaders to distinguish between three groups present: firstly, team members who had begun the new church and Christians who had joined since; secondly, the de-churched; and thirdly, the non-churched.¹²

We found that proportions of the three groups varied. There were some differences by type of fresh expression of Church. Some attracted more de-churched and others more non-churched. There were also links to the length of time a church had existed; quite often they seemed to reach a plateau, or perhaps a natural unit size. However, it made little difference whether these young churches were led by ordained or lay people, or by men or women.

Yet two headlines stand out. The first is that among the second set of ten dioceses, in rough terms, 40% of the attenders at fresh expressions of Church were existing Christians, 27% were de-churched and 33% were non-churched. Secondly, on average across the same dioceses, for every one person sent out, there were now 2.6 more people

attending—in other words, 260% growth over time. These figures varied across individual stories and even whole dioceses.

Church Army's Research Unit was not only interested in numbers, but also asked questions about ways in which these young churches were growing in maturity. We do not crudely equate 'success' with mere numbers. Yet, it is undeniable that both headlines reveal a story of Christians relating successfully to those outside their group, and in proportions that are either rare or totally unknown in the wider Church. Bob Jackson, in *Hope for the Church*, drew trenchant conclusions from earlier similar data that I gathered in the 1980s and 1990s.¹³ He argued that planting is the most fruitful strategy the Church of England has.

This all happened not because these young churches knew the theory of church reproduction but because they practised it. We now have firm evidence that reproducing churches has this effect. It will be interesting to see in the next ten years, if the theory becomes widely known, what further difference that might make.

Though I have made it clear that more people are motivated by the practice than the reproductive theory, I suggest that Dulles' seventh test is passed. The practice of starting fresh expressions of Church—at least an outworking and perhaps born of some dim awareness of the theory—demonstrates significant fruitfulness in enabling members to relate to those outside their own group.

The next test is moral.

Dulles' fourth test

Test four reads: 'Tendency to foster the virtues and values generally admired by Christians.' Dulles cites the following: 'faith, hope, disinterested love of God, sacrificial love of fellow men, honesty, humility, sorrow for sin and the like'. He continues that if 'a doctrine or theological system sustains these values, they will be favourably inclined toward it',¹⁴ adding that the reverse is also true.

Ellen Charry, in her fine but demanding book *By the Renewing of Your Minds*, takes this test yet further. Her deepest conviction is that ‘God is not just good to us but for us.’¹⁵ She argues that ‘the classic theologians based their understanding of human excellence on knowing and loving God, the imitation of or assimilation to whom brings proper human dignity and flourishing.’¹⁶ She has invented a word for this process, the adjective *aretegenic*, from the Greek words for ‘virtue’ and ‘to beget’. It means ‘conducive to virtue’.

Charry argues that unless a doctrine results in virtues, at best the way the doctrine has been communicated is flawed. At worst, it is probably untrue because it lacks aretegenic character. More simply, ‘If something is harmful to us, it must be false and certainly cannot be the truth of God.’¹⁷ She continues, ‘Classical thought believed that truth, beauty and goodness are affective; that is, they change the seeker by bringing her into their orbit and under their influence.’¹⁸ This raises the stakes surrounding any fresh claims to truth. Does that view produce virtue? According to Charry, these concerns cannot be divided. She concludes, ‘The pastoral functions of doctrine, then, are to clarify and, when necessary, revise the teachings of the Church in order to invite believers to be transformed by knowing God.’¹⁹ The first step is to ‘reconnect truth and goodness.’²⁰

In relation to the classic marks of the Church, hymns praise the beauty of holiness and the beauty of the (apostolic) feet of those who bring good news. The psalmist calls unity ‘good and pleasant’ (Psalm 133:1). Years ago, David Watson argued that love is the one central mark of the Church.²¹ Virtues exercised unselfconsciously are beautiful. But how do such churches fare in relation to Dulles’ specific list?

Virtues and a reproducing Church

I’m not saying that these virtues are more present in fresh expressions of Church than elsewhere. Dulles only asks for a tendency to foster their presence, not an ability to outshine other churches. Nor do I need to prove that every fresh expression does this. We are talking about

overall practice, which is under examination for its tendency to produce such virtues. But if it was true that fresh expressions of Church had a tendency to produce the opposite vices, that would be evidence against the theory. In looking at Dulles' list of virtues and values, I immediately notice that such qualities would be ideal in any team beginning a young church. But is there any evidence that fresh expressions of Church have the tendency to foster these virtues?

It does take *faith* to set out into the unknown, a characteristic in creating fresh expressions of Church. In consultations with leaders, I often hear them talk about 'making it up as I go along'. Non-identical reproduction, rather than replication, makes deeper demands of faith, because we don't know the result at the start. This fosters dependent prayer, which is related to faith. The mission task involves explaining the faith to others, which takes faith. I have watched how, as their journey continues, faith grows in the young community as the discernment unfolds, as new challenges emerge and gifts in ministry are discovered. Often leaders and members sense that the task is beyond them and only by grace and faith can it be fulfilled.

I have noticed that *hope* is engendered in at least three ways. Partly, it is in association with the possibilities of a new life. Just as, when a married couple prepare for the birth of a child, energy is released, so it is with a team preparing for church reproduction. There is also increased hope that a fresh chance, beyond the confines of past expressions of Church, may be a more fruitful way forward. I also detect hope in the creative partnership with the Holy Spirit, to discover and fashion what is needed in pursuing a fresh mission and the resultant creation of a young church. Such hopes are not always realised, but they are usually there.

Regarding the *disinterested love of God*—altruism is difficult to detect, unless you have known someone well over a period of time. One pointer towards it might be the observed desire for others to know God. More costly is the willingness to amend existing ways of being Church, including worship, away from those forms which suit the planting team,

in order to suit the context. This instinct puts sacrificial spirituality firmly on to the agenda of every young church.

The *sacrificial love of others* connects to the previous virtue. What closely embodies this virtue is the ‘dying to live’ instinct²² drawn from the ministry of Christ. The attitude of those sowing the seeds of gospel and Church must be to put those in the receiving culture first. It is paralleled by the self-sacrificing attitude of parents to their children, not least of mothers. This feature should characterise sending churches in relation to those they plant. The attitudes advocated by the reproductive theory, for all fresh expressions of Church and their sending bodies, are not always followed; nevertheless, the theory itself fosters this attitude of sacrifice.

Honesty is related to truth and realism. Pressures brought by internal ambition and external demands, especially for quick progress to financial self-sufficiency, militate against the fostering of this value. Against this, I notice that younger churches are aware of the failure of past models. They also evaluate themselves more often, because they are more experimental and have less of a track record to rely on. Indeed, some leadership teams get tired by ceaseless external and internal evaluation. Evaluation indicates a desire for honesty, though at times it can look like teenage self-absorption and doubt. Some younger churches have external steering groups. From my participation in a number of these groups, I am aware that the wider Church is seeking a level of honesty and realism about its life and progress.

Humility is a virtue that is well placed to offer correctives to any new churches tempted to arrogance. Yet the reproductive theory helps uphold this virtue by its insistence on the Church’s flawed capacity to reproduce, for which grace is needed. It also teaches that all churches had a sending or parent body, which should foster a sense of interconnectedness that resists pride and self-sufficiency. Moreover, reproduction as part of the nature of the Church forestalls future complacency. To plant is only to begin; it is never to arrive. The future aspect of the coming kingdom makes this clear. Like the heaven, the

Church is never to stop growing and permeating the dough. The language of 'expressions of Church' should teach humility. All are partial and all need the others.

Sorrow for sin shows itself periodically. Young communities experience tensions. In addition they know that quality of community matters internally and in their common witness. Because they are smaller, carry fewer passengers and live closer to the edge, when failure of community life occurs, the results are more obvious and the costs higher.²³ This is not quite the same as sorrow for such failures, but it is related to it.

In relation to all these virtues and the capacity of the reproductive strand to foster them, we must not be idealistic. Sara Savage writes about the positives and dark side of parish life, in which 'the heavy costs of maintaining the positives are mainly borne by the clergy'.²⁴ Rightly, in my view, she states, 'It is not possible to shed the problems discussed in this chapter simply by starting new forms of Church.'²⁵ Although she suggests that fresh expressions of Church will have a honeymoon period, they should not be deceived by it.

With this healthy caveat against misplaced idealism, I arrive at the view that the reproductive strand of Church identity does, in the above ways, help foster this set of desirable virtues. That does not imply, however, that they are always embodied in every fresh expression of Church.

Dulles' fifth test

Dulles calls his fifth test 'Correspondence with the religious experience of men today'. He explains that this test has two applications. One is that religious experience has a part to play, held alongside scripture and tradition, in establishing what is true. The second is a missional connection. Writing about a significant change of context, he says, 'Granted the tremendous cultural shifts... it is to be expected that men

today will approach the Christian message from a new point of view.²⁶ Then he argues that some past, honoured models of Church will be too culturally bound to past images and concerns.

This test could be taken as cultural captivity, allowing secular beliefs and patterns to dominate, and thus be dubious. It would be open to charges of relativism and syncretism, or establishing truth by majority voting. However, seen at best, it is an argument for churches that relate well to the culture they are for. That is one intention of the reproductive theory and all the best fresh expressions of Church. The reproductive strand of Church identity is well placed to be part of the response to the widely perceived collapse of the credibility of the Christendom-type Church. The reproductive Church provides a set of positive images that contemporary people could applaud, for it embodies values that people welcome today.

An emphasis on the reproductive strand places a high value on the Church as organic, rather than institutional.²⁷ It also fosters a sense of vulnerability and weakness rather than strength, which, in an age suspicious of power, has attractions. This connects to the vulnerability of the incarnation and to Jesus' words about tiny seeds or lambs sent among wolves. The sense of weakness and yet potential is starkly put in the observation that if the Church does not reproduce, it will die.

The reproductive strand also accents the relational nature of being Church. This applies to the loving engagement between those sent and those to whom they are sent, and also between the sending and sent church. It overlaps with seeing Church as creative,²⁸ which stands in stark contrast to its perception as negative, world-denying, unchangeable and sterile. Favourable secular local press coverage given to fresh expressions of Church stories bears witness to this resonance and the positive connections being seen.

The reproductive also favours understanding the Church as contextual. The soil and seeds analogy demonstrates this view. In addition, the 'dying to live' process underlines the reproductive strand's deep

commitment to the expectation that what emerges will be related to the past but different from it, because of context. This non-identical identity from their sending and sponsoring bodies is what gives fresh expressions of Church greater freedom to work with people not previously reached. This approach is thus differentiated from much evangelism which is wedded to a 'come to us as we are and learn to like it' attitude. Starting further churches is also attractive to some because it fits with the value placed upon choice and newness. These last two may be tactical advantages and contemporary images, but in themselves they cannot become the rationale, as critiques by Hull, Milbank, and Davison and Milbank²⁹ rightly make clear.

The reproductive strand also highlights that Church can be viewed as developmental and not static. Our world is interested in personal, psychological, economic and social development. It thinks that change is inevitable and necessary. This is positive as long as it is linked to the next factor.

The reproductive also opens the possibility of seeing Church as ecological. I mean this in the sense that true ecclesial reproduction always takes place in sympathetic relationship to an environment. Ecology has a profound interest in what is indigenous. It values balance with surroundings, and sustainability. All of these concerns inform the birth and growth of sustainable community. They help a new group to live well in its context, and promote the greater health of that context. This should be true of churches as well as wider communities. This contrasts helpfully with past views of the Church as destructive, detached or parasitic, or as institutional, hidebound and impervious to context.

I have taken Dulles' seventh test in a positive way, because he would not endorse capitulation to contemporary thinking. The reproductive strand to Church identity can engage widely with values that many people hold today. It can help them to see the Church as a group of people who are capable of principled and sympathetic change. It brings to the fore the creative, personal and contextual side of Church

as an organism, which will also need to be an organisation but in ways that serve the organism, not the other way round.

For each of these tests of utility, evidence shows that the Church as reproductive engages with them positively. In some places, the Church needs to heed their wisdom; in others, such as tests three and seven, it most strongly fulfils them and highlights values that the whole Church does well to attend to.

The reproductive element makes some surprises normal

The Church Army research on around 1100 Anglican fresh expressions of Church³⁰ has revealed some unexpected features. Contrary to the impression created by publicised large transplants, most fresh expressions of Church are small. The average size so far is around 50 attenders. What we are seeing is the multiplication of many, varied, young and small churches. Moreover, start-ups have increased four- to fivefold since 2004. This is a very different scenario from what Anglicans knew for decades—a steady number of long-existing churches, the majority of which were in slow decline and a minority of which grew in numbers. In a reproductive Church, the multiplication of small groups looks more normal.

Though the fresh expressions of Church have grown significantly from their start, we now also know that a steady 48% of them reach some kind of numerical plateau.³¹ In the past we would have been likely either to accept a plateau or to denigrate it. In a reproductive church we should ask two questions: have you reached your natural unit size, and when might it be right under God to begin another church? Once again, this is not normal denominational thinking but is natural in a reproductive church.

More churches bring the need for more leaders, and the next discovery has been that half of those started are lay-led. The surprise is that 36%

are laity without training or accreditation—those we have called the ‘lay-lay’. They are more often women, serving in their spare time and voluntarily. When we dig deeper, we find that the young churches they lead are no less effective in mission and are taking much the same steps forward in ecclesial maturity.³² It all suggests to me that, in the reproductive Church, we need to accept that formally trained ministry exists to serve the Church as it emerges, rather than to organise churches around the ordained ministry that we already have. Such a view also fits with a wider change in the role of the full-time ordained.

There are more strands to this than I can trace here, but the heart of them is that priests of the future need to see their ministry as *episcopal*—an oversight of the leaders of a number of churches. In that role they provide vision, act as a focus of unity, model catholicity and interdependence between the churches, care for the local leaders, and enable, as well as authorise, vocations.³³ These roles are ideal to support a reproductive diverse set of non-identical churches.

There are various ways in which the fresh expressions of Church show their non-identical character, including how they exhibit both continuity with past churches and changes from them. Let me take you through three groups of changes, showing also the continuities that exist, because there have been precedents.

Changes of practice that involve flexibility

The day, time and venue of meeting are now all more flexible. The instinct behind this change is to take context seriously. As we have seen, the incarnation is the theological basis for it. About half of fresh expressions of Church meet during the week, and the same is true about the choice of a venue other than a church.

A deeper change is the thought that our past instinct for parish and territory is not an ultimate value. It is one way in which context works. There is nothing wrong with parish; what is wrong is to think that it works for everyone. So we have seen the birth of churches from shared

relationships, quite often related to a shared stage of life. We call them network churches and special interest group churches. This reworks the application of being apostolic, or missional.

Another deep change is the movement away from thinking that congregation is the norm, and the realisation that Church is multi-level. We observe cells for up to twelve, clusters for groups up to 50, congregations of up to 200, then even larger celebrations and diocese, and so on. That gives flexibility in choosing the right size of group to respond to a context. It also establishes that neither oneness nor catholicity means being much the same size.

Yet we've seen such changes before. Mid-week Communion and the 1970s house churches demonstrated variety of day and venue. Chaplaincy and cross-cultural mission have always operated in context and beyond parochial thinking. Moreover, Anglicans have always resisted congregationalism and, in theory, held that Church has many levels. These examples of reimagined change are only sharpening a past trend.

Changes linked to belonging

We are seeing the end of a format in which people passively sit in church pews or chairs. Instead, lay people participate in a variety of ways and they are trusted. That change is not unique to fresh expressions of Church but it is characteristic of them. It comes about partly because their leaders are not control freaks, unlike many clergy, though the latter dress it up as necessary 'quality control'. Many kinds of fresh expression of Church exhibit and foster a greater freedom to explore in worship. Messy Church is the widest and best-known example. The leaders trust their people and the word and Spirit given to them.

This is related to the next change—the centrality of being a community around Jesus. Most of us were brought up to think that worship was central, so this represents a radical and significant change. All religions worship; it is not especially Christian. Encountering Jesus, though, is

characteristically Christian. That is what leads to worship and gives it bite and authenticity. This change appears in various kinds of fresh expression of Church.

The next factor sits alongside the first two. With less passive people, and community being central, it is intriguing that only about half of the fresh expressions of Church have an ordained leader. Historically, this is at least unusual. Yet all the signs are that these are young churches.

Have we ever been here before? Passivity was challenged by the arrival of family services 40 years ago. Trust in the people was urged by the writings of Roland Allen in the Edwardian period, and in the 1960s by Donovan, the Jesuit missionary. Similarly in the world Church, the Base Ecclesial Communities, of which there are hundreds of thousands, place stress on the quality of community, as do most forms of monasticism. In 1982 the Anglican John Tiller urged changes in our understanding of ordained ministry. He argued that clergy existed to enable local lay ministries to flourish. There are precedents to learn from. The changes are evolution, not revolution.

Changes within Church identity

One focus is that we are looking for discipleship, not attendance at church services, as characteristic of being Church. We are followers of Jesus, not visitors to ancient buildings. This is a vast subject, but it is encouraging that around 80% of all the fresh expressions of Church we surveyed have taken some steps down that road. This trend connects with holiness as one mark of the Church.

The fresh expressions of Church amply demonstrate the theory of the non-identical reproduction of churches. They show that it is normal for churches to give birth to further churches. We observe that these churches are like and unlike the churches that send them, just as our children are ours, but are not us. The same should be true of each generation of Church. This is how change and continuity stay connected. Yet the new shows something that the old could not express, which is one element of how good catholicity works.

With the dissolving of Christendom, the Church is no longer at the centre of events. Yet the edge is a natural Church location. The pre-Christendom story runs through Galilee, not Jerusalem, in the catacombs, not the forum. The early Church included lepers, slaves, women and the mentally ill, all seen as people on the edge of society. A number of fresh expressions of Church engage with the poor and cultural groups that are not much regarded by society.

What of precedents? The method in Methodism was about discipleship in accountable groups. The birth of non-identical reproduction of churches and the journey to their own maturity was in the ‘three self’ thinking of missionary leader Henry Venn. A number of groups in Church history, not least the monastic and Anabaptists, have had a prophetic effect by living at the edge.

Perhaps what is new is that such a wide range of changes are occurring at much the same time.

New but old

Yet I want to say that the heart of being Christ’s Church has not changed at all. I borrow Archbishop Rowan’s words in 2004: ‘We are seeing what corporate forms of life actually happen—when people meet Jesus.’

All these recent discoveries are the outcrop of what happens when you get a reproductive Church. This is the practical evidence that churches are reproducing, not just that the numbers are increasing. This book shows that there is a sound theory behind this evidence. It makes sense of what we are already seeing. If we accept the theory, then all this is the new ‘normal’.

In one way, it is but an echo of what was written back in 1927 by Roland Allen in *The Spontaneous Expansion of the Church*.³⁴ If expansion is spontaneous, then it arises from the Church’s calling and nature. Allen argued that it should be natural, and only various fears (which are still

around today) prevented it. I've tried to go further and show a wider biblical and theological basis. Now it is the time for the Church to wake out of its sleep and realise a glorious truth about itself.

This suggests that the Church is rather important and significant in the purposes of God. To the question of whether a high doctrine of the Church is believable today, I now turn.

Notes

- 1 Many examples occur in the 55 stories in Church Army's *Encounters on the Edge* series, or shorter versions of stories on the Fresh Expressions website.
- 2 Divorce is used by Roland Allen for the relationship between mission societies and the Church in *The Spontaneous Expansion of the Church* (Lutterworth, 2006), p. 117.
- 3 P. Avis, *The Anglican Understanding of the Church* (SPCK, 2000), p. 3. Avis can take the opposite view. See the Porvoo Theological Conference 2004: 'Mission precedes Church... The Church exists because God's mission is under way.'
- 4 D. Bosch, *Transforming Mission* (Orbis, 1991), p. 372.
- 5 A. Morgan, *Following Jesus: The plural of disciple is Church* (Resource, 2015).
- 6 S. Murray, *Church Planting: Laying foundations* (Paternoster, 1998), p. 60.
- 7 The last in the list is argued on the basis in 1 Corinthians 11:26: 'until he comes'.
- 8 Murray, *Church Planting: Laying foundations*, pp. 20–23.
- 9 S. Croft, *Transforming Communities* (DLT, 2002), p. 59.
- 10 A. Dulles, *Models of the Church* (Gill & Macmillan, 1988), p. 192.
- 11 www.churcharmy.org.uk/fxcresearch: the site also provides separate shorter reports on each diocese covered.
- 12 In later years, Church Army's Research Unit tested the extent to which the leaders' views were accurate by a smaller survey of attenders. This report, 'Who's there?' can be found on the Research section of the Church Army website.
- 13 B. Jackson, *Hope for the Church* (CHP, 2002), p. 35.
- 14 Dulles, *Models of The Church*, p. 192.
- 15 E. Charry, *By the Renewing of Your Minds* (OUP, 1997), p. 3.
- 16 Charry, *By the Renewing of Your Minds*, p. 18.
- 17 Charry, *By the Renewing of Your Minds*, p. 233.

- 18 Charry, *By the Renewing of Your Minds*, p. 235.
- 19 Charry, *By the Renewing of Your Minds*, p. 232.
- 20 Charry, *By the Renewing of Your Minds*, p. 238.
- 21 D. Watson, *I Believe in the Church* (Hodder & Stoughton, 1978), pp. 356–68.
- 22 This phrase reoccurs in G. Cray (ed.), *Mission-shaped Church* (CHP, 2009), pp. 30–31, 88–89, 115.
- 23 A number of these dynamics are highlighted in C. Dalpra, ‘Chasing the dream’ and ‘The cost of community’, *Encounters on the Edge* 37 and 38 (Church Army, 2008).
- 24 S. Savage, ‘On the analyst’s couch’ in S. Croft (ed.), *The Future of the Parish System* (CUP, 2006), p. 21.
- 25 Savage, ‘On the analyst’s couch’, p. 30.
- 26 Dulles, *Models of the Church*, p. 192. I take the non-inclusive language simply to mark this as a text of its time.
- 27 Jackson concurs in *Hope for the Church*, p. 141.
- 28 Dave Male wrote up the story of the Net, a fresh expression of Church in Huddersfield, and reflected on the current range of terms. He decided to use ‘creating Church’. D. Male, *Church Unplugged* (Authentic, 2008), p. 4.
- 29 J. Hull, *Mission-shaped Church: A response*; J. Milbank, ‘Stale Expressions: the management-shaped Church’, *Studies in Christian Ethics*, 21.1 (online 2008); A. Davison and A. Milbank, *For the Parish* (SCM, 2010).
- 30 G. Lings, *The Day of Small Things* (Church Army, 2016).
- 31 This percentage adds up those cases that plateau very rapidly, those that do so over a few more years and those whose numbers fluctuate.
- 32 See the Church Army website for an eight-page report on this feature: www.churcharmy.org.uk/fxcresearch.
- 33 A fuller description of the history leading up to this and of these changes was given in a 2004 lecture by George Lings. It can be downloaded from the website of Church Army’s Research Unit.
- 34 This book is still a stirring read and a trenchant exposure of the fears—doctrinal, moral and organisational—that quench spontaneous expansion, or non-identical reproduction, of the Church.

A groundbreaking perspective on how churches reproduce

In an original and exciting theological move, senior authority on fresh expressions of Church and church planting George Lings suggests that we look at Church differently. Based on extensive research, Lings argues that the Church has a calling and capacity to reproduce which is inherent in what Church is, rather than as its function. The Church reproduces, albeit non-identically, because it is the Church; that's how it fulfils its mission. This seminal and inspiring work will inform and re-energise church leaders for the task in hand in this generation and beyond.

Canon Dr George Lings is Director of the Church Army's Research Unit, Sheffield, and Visiting Fellow of St John's College, Durham. He contributed to *Mission-shaped Church* as well as writing over 50 booklets in the *Encounters on the Edge* series on the evolving theory and practice of bringing to birth fresh expressions of Church.



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