

## THE SOCIETY FOR ECUMENICAL STUDIES

***For the Parish: A Critique of Fresh Expressions, Andrew Davison & Alison Milbank, London, SCM 2010***

*A review by Donald Norwood*

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50% of Anglican Parishes are now involved in some form of Fresh Expressions of being Church. For the other 50% this book will serve as a caution. Think deeply about what you are doing before you too hastily reject the Parish system, which for all its faults is more inclusive, there for everyone in the Parish. This book is, as the title says, *for* the Parish.

This is not the first weighty critique of *Mission-Shaped Church, church planting and fresh expressions of church in a changing context* from 2004 and its offspring, but it must surely be the most learned and thorough and on a broad range of issues. John Hull wrote a pungent critique, 'Mission-shaped and Kingdom-focused', but our authors don't like the way Hull regards the Church as only a means to an end. Their study is also more detailed. It contains, for example, a searching analysis of church and culture. People talk of Jesus and Jewish culture, but forget that Jesus was the culture. He too was Jewish. 'Culture' is not something fixed and rigid, but is created by God and so already prepared for the Gospel, or so they claim. But culture is also to be challenged, especially if it is the market-based consumer culture, where parishioners become customers and shop around to find the church that best suits their needs. Like the glossy packaging of 'fresh' food, the label does not tell you what you are getting, just that it is 'fresh'. They don't think much of the mixed-economy model of church planting and gently criticise Archbishop Rowan for introducing the phrase at a Synod in 2003.

The book's main weakness is that it is not terribly sympathetic. If all is well with the Parish, why are half of them searching for alternative ways of

reaching more people and are they succeeding? We need a serious dialogue, but books like this offer only a dialogue of the deaf. It also suffers from what I call High Church or High Anglican snobbery; though it is interesting that, in their plea for better theology, they nearly always have to look beyond Anglicanism - to Roman Catholic theologians like von Balthasar, or Orthodox like Afanasiev or Bulgakov. The weaknesses of 'fresh expressions' are conveniently dismissed as 'Free Church Protestantism', where congregations devise their own forms of worship without much understanding of liturgy, and sing hymns that have a shallow grasp of the faith. Such sweeping generalisations about other churches spoil the otherwise scholarly discussion. The so-called Free Church have produced some of the best Bible scholars and hymn writers - and established communities like Taizé and Iona. Only insecure Anglicans dismiss us with a shrug.

But don't dismiss this book. It is serious scholarship and very readable. Read on.