

## Crucible Book Review

Kester Brewin. *The Complex Christ: Signs of Emergence in the Urban Church*. London: SPCK. 2004 and Rod Garner. *Facing the City: Urban Mission in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. Peterborough: Epworth Press. 2004

The hallmark of the city is complexity. Globalisation processes produce ever more complicated links between the economic, social, cultural and environmental dimensions of the city and change has become a constant feature of urban living. Kester Brewin and Rod Garner both offer a response to urban complexity as the 21<sup>st</sup> century gets under way yet they chart the church's way forward quite differently.

Kester Brewin is a secondary school teacher in inner London and a member of the alternative worship group *Vaux* which explores urban theology through a variety of media. He takes a 'whole systems' approach to the church's life. He is interested in the 'Emergent Church' which equates to James Fowler's 'conjunctive church' which is stage 5 in faith development terms. This is the stage where 'the complexities of life are held together, and where hierarchies have given way to networks of organisation' (p.14).

The Emergent Church is found at the edge of chaos. It is shaped by light touch regulatory systems that are identified by contemporary organisational theory. Just as human organisations now seek survival by evolution from pyramidal, top down structures 'into conjunctive, devolved, bottom up adaptable networks that are trim, agile and flexible' so that they might respond appropriately an increasingly complex environment (p.73), so this must be the church's way forward. Openness to this environment, feedback mechanisms that allow the ability to interpret and respond efficiently to it and a model of leadership that is 'effective without being abusive' (p.91) are just three characteristics that the Emergent Church shares with other organisations seeking to adapt to complexity. Evolution, which is bottom up and gradual, is the model of change that Brewin embraces and at the heart of his theology is the incarnation, understood as 'God modelling a bottom up emergent system' (p.154), that offers the potential of transformation to a church whose future is intertwined with its ability to succeed in the city.

Rod Garner is by contrast a parish priest in the Church of England with twenty five years experience of urban ministry and theological education. *Facing the City* arises out of his doctoral research at Manchester University, supervised by Professor Elaine Graham. Garner's anxiety is that the current praxis of the local urban church is not sufficiently viable in the light of the global forces shaping contemporary urban experience. Using the resources of a public theology discourse he argues that 'theological acuity, prayer, worship, the promotion of civil society and partnerships' (p.138) are the way forward for urban mission. He ends, evocatively, with a reflection informed by Josephine Butler's observation that the church is called to a 'deep, difficult, holy work' in serving the poor. This is an attempt to draw together reflections on the 'ever more perplexing configurations of the city' and the nineteenth century tradition of urban Christian mission represented chiefly by F D Maurice and leading up to William Temple and more recently the late Lord David Sheppard who wrote a commendatory forward. Garner is optimistic about the future of the urban church and this book represents an important challenge to those who would side with authors of previous generations of theologians who have been overly pessimistic

about the church's future in the city - Harvey Cox is justly rebuked in this regard (p.108).

In each book the nature of the urban church is central but Garner's church is easier to identify. Often examples are based on Garner's own experience in Hull, Wolverhampton and Liverpool and the urban practitioner will find valuable reflections on local church responses that are down to earth and helpfully discussed.

Brewin's church is less tangible although it's equally based on the author's experience of the city. His vision is for church life that embodies the principle of 'gift exchange' whereby the breadth of personal gifting is identified, celebrated and drawn into the worship experience. Brewin also offers an exploration of social boundaries stimulated by reflections on 'dirt' (indebted to Mary Douglas' book *Purity and Danger*) in order to identify excluded persons and themes. This is rounded off with an interesting reflection on 'trickster' concepts (drawn from other anthropological sources) to show how Christ in this role subverts boundaries and invites inclusion.

These are two extremely worthwhile contributions to contemporary urban theology but both Garner and Brewin will face theological challenges. For Garner, the future of the church in the city is not fully explored and this somewhat undermined the desire articulated in the subtitle to set a course for urban mission in the 21<sup>st</sup> century: the material represents a clarification of where it is that many city churches find themselves today rather than bold statement concerning the future. For Brewin, the challenge is to adduce and evaluate examples of the Emergent Church which somehow seems to be hidden in the complexities of the city. There is much vision here but maybe the future of the church in the city is even more complex than Brewin suggests: a great deal hangs on the metaphor of 'bottom up' processes and very often it is far from clear what this means in practice.

It is an intriguing thought to suggest that the next step for each is to engage with the other's methodology. If Garner were to work with organisational and anthropological theory this might well have allowed him to probe much further the question of the church's emerging role in communities. If Brewin were to engage with the sort of political and historical material that Garner works with then there might well be a higher degree of earthing in the ordinary realities of city living. Perhaps that's why *Facing the City* and *The Complex Christ* make such a good pair of books to review in tandem but maybe it also indicates the increasing number of ways of doing urban theology and therefore the importance of having good conversations both between theologians and with those of other academic disciplines.

Garner's book is accessible but I found there was a tendency to rely upon quotations from others when I would have been more interested in the author's own words and perspectives. This perhaps reflects the educative side of Garner's ministry and certainly for students in the early stages of a contextual or urban theology course there is much that is of benefit here – for example, chapter 2 that tells the often neglected story of *Faith in the City* or chapter 5 that calls for a 'Big Enough Theology' that is public, committed to the principles of partnership and establishing an appropriate Christian identity. Brewin's book will also find its way on to bibliographies. It contains within it an imaginative reworking of the biblical narrative of the city designed to counter negative biblical theologies of the city and this will make a useful foil for those who are wrestling with such issues. Bravely, and in the spirit of

'conjunctivity', Brewin invites responses through the *Vaux* website (<http://www.thecomplexchrist.com/>); there are already a number of responses and it is to be hoped that this is a conversation that continues to generate theological insight.

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