Mutuality as a Postcolonial Praxis for Mission

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Abstract

In an era in North-Atlantic societies of an increasing move away from religious affiliation and practice, churches have attempted to reimagine what it means to be Christian communities of faith with an eye on creating a spaciousness for the so-called non-believer. However, the same sort of intentionality has not been applied to what liberation theologians have called the ‘non-person’, those who live at the margins of society. Drawing from the conceptual framework of postcolonial theory, this essay presents mutuality as a praxis for mission, seeking to explore how ecclesial identity and authority, worship practices and service ministries might be reimagined accordingly.

Keywords


The Changing Place of Churches on the Public Landscape

Churches on both sides of the Atlantic are facing a profound paradigm-shift in their place in society. In the United States, a recent survey found that more than 80% of Americans did not attend a public act of Christian worship on any given weekend, with only 17.3% of the US population actually attending. The study found that the trajectory of that trend would mean that by 2020, weekend church worship attendance would drop to 14.7%. The 2012 Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life study Nones on the Rise found that one-fifth

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of the U.S. public – and a third of adults under 30 – are religiously unaffiliated today, the highest percentages ever in Pew Research Center polling. The comparative statistic in all of this is the relative growth of the proportion of Americans who define themselves as ‘spiritual but not religious’, rising from 9% in 1998 to 14% just ten years later and to 18% in 2012. On the other side of the Atlantic, the most recent data from the population census of England and Wales found that 25% of the adult population claimed no religious affiliation, rising from 15% over the past ten years.

In short, what these statistics say is that the Sunday-morning efforts that North-Atlantic churches are expending to connect with the spiritual identity of the population at large, and with 18–30 year-olds in particular, are failing. Or, at the least, the connections that are being made, are not enough to buck the overall trend of a context for church mission where increasing proportions of the population are looking somewhere other than church to express and explore their spirituality. I do not intend here to add to the now extensive work that expands on statistics such as these in order to demonstrate how exactly church-going is on the decline. Rather, what I am interested in exploring is how this era of retraction is also an era of positive change. For, as depressing reading studies such as these make, the other side of decline is the opportunity for re-invention, as Christian communities of faith are beginning to reimagine what it means to be church in the twenty-first century.

Making Space for the Non-Believer

Much of the literature that examines changes in church-going is interested in reimagining the relational dynamics of church life and ministry. A major emphasis in this regard has been placed upon the so called ‘non-believer’. For instance, it has been argued that in order to become ‘indigenous, relevant communities’, able to form and to continue in relationships with multiple generations of non-church-goers, churches will need to unlearn a lot of things.

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3 Ibid., p. 10.
that they thought were right about being church, offering more primacy to non-believers in how access is gained into ecclesial communities.\footnote{M. Slaughter, \textit{Unlearning Church} (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2008), p. 53.}

Along such a vein, received models of identity and belonging are being urged to give way to models of church membership based on belonging by association, viewing those who belong by association as a full part of Christian communities and not merely potential members of congregations.\footnote{R. Thomas, \textit{Counting people in: Changing the way we think about membership and the church} (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2003), p. 60.} With this encouragement to move into alternative understandings of identity, others have argued for alternative visions of how churches might exercise agency in their practice of ministry, moving away from offering multiple church ‘programs’ as a way to secure church growth, and moving towards an emphasis on being church through relational practices such as ‘radical, gracious hospitality’.\footnote{M. A. Olson, \textit{Moving beyond church growth: An alternative vision for congregations} (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2002), pp. 53–4.}

With such calls for changes in the self-understanding of churches is a call for a shift in the self-understanding and expression of church leadership that increasingly embraces creatively collaborative practices and adaptive explorations in the shaping of institutions and communities. For churches, this desire has seen a rise in styles of leadership wherein the ‘new’ church leader becomes one who practices ‘bonding relationships that reinforce identities and affinities, bridging across different social groups and individuals, and linking institutions to other institutions and resources’.\footnote{M. Grundy, \textit{What’s new in church leadership Creative Responses to the Changing Pattern of Church Life} (Norwich, UK: Canterbury Press, 2007), p. 69.}

These sorts of changes in self-understanding and agency have begun to form in recognizable clusters on both sides of the Atlantic such as the ‘Fresh Expressions’, ‘Mission-shaped Church’ and the ‘Emergent’ and ‘Emerging’ church movements. The missional reimaginings that these movements represent do not constitute a homogenous pattern. Whereas the Church of England ‘Fresh Expressions’ movement has often seen the emergence of new patterns of ministry within received ecclesiastical structures, the emergent movement on both sides of the Atlantic has largely resisted denominational identification. Moreover, within these varied movements there is a wide diversity of interests that draw from a range of influences. For instance, within recent emergent church practices the variety of influences has been as
far-reaching as ‘New Monasticism’, transnational migrant communities, and hip-hop.

The particularities within and between the movements are less important than the general pattern that is becoming manifest: that adaptive and contextually authentic patterns of ministry are tracing the edges of new forms of church life that run-counter to the wider scenario of institutional decline. Such new forms have tended to coalesce around certain principles. For instance, the Anglican Consultative Council (a body of the worldwide Communion of Anglican churches) has identified ‘Five Marks of Mission’: to proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom; to teach, baptise and nurture new believers; to respond to human need by loving service; to seek to transform unjust structures of society, to challenge violence of every kind and to pursue peace and reconciliation; to strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth. These ‘marks of mission’ have manifest themselves in numerous ‘fresh expressions’ of church collated in the widely influential Church of England report, *Mission-Shaped Church*. Gathering evidence from across the Church of England, the report found a number of consistent, new patterns of ministry such as: alternative worship communities; base ecclesial communities (drawing from the practice of liberation theologians’ work in poor communities across South and Central America); cafe churches; cell churches; churches arising out of community initiatives; network-focused churches; and traditional forms of church inspiring new interest.

In their transatlantic study of Anglican emergent faith communities, Gray-Reeves and Perham discovered a set of distinguishing features similar to the findings of the *Mission-Shaped Church* report, particularly as they pertained to worship, that included emphasizing a clear sense of identity, movement and

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the sense of being on a journey, a diversity of worship styles, prioritizing belonging before believing, the use of the whole body in worship, privileging beauty over the need to have a common text, a desire to be locally authentic in liturgical practice and a polity that enabled the collaboration and ministry of all.\textsuperscript{14} What is striking about the expressions of church that Gray-Reeves and Perham found, is that these emerging patterns of church life are not simply replacing the old with the new, rather they present a ‘mixed-economy’\textsuperscript{15} of ministries wherein new expressions emerge alongside already established church structures and practices, each in the search for a connection with the increasingly post-religious person’s spiritual seeking.

Along with these changes in the understanding of the identity, agency, leadership, and missional principles of churches, the perception of the role of church-goers has also been shifting. A common theme has been an ‘attempt to move away from a tendency in religious institutions for communities to gather around religious persons and places and an endeavor to move toward a community of ministers, empowered as witnesses of Christ in the world.’\textsuperscript{16} Indeed, this priority placed on the ministry of all is one that seeks to nurture and commission people to seek justice and peace, thus helping them ‘to ask hard questions about the world we live in, in relation to justice, and cultivating a desire for God’s Kingdom on Earth’.\textsuperscript{17} Such a church is one that emphasizes an ‘Apostolic Spirituality’, wherein the formation of individuals is for a life of discipleship in the world with space for each person to discern their ‘specific missionary call’.\textsuperscript{18}

In sum, these emerging themes – the primacy of non-believers; belonging by association; radical, gracious hospitality; adaptive leadership; bridging across different social groups; contextually authentic patterns of ministry; the transformation of community; interdependent relationships; and the collaboration and ministry of all wherein each person discerns their specific missionary call – are all positive signs of churches that are seeking to attend to what it means to form community and to be in relationship with contemporary culture. That said, attempts to assess what the paradigm-shift described above represents depend heavily on what the objective of the shift is seen to be. If the
shift in what it means to be church has as its objective a desire to re-think how communities of faith might more effectively connect with society in an increasingly post-religious era, then it might be argued that these patterns of being church are a move in the right direction, given their attentiveness to the shifting sands of postmodernity that mean that the received structures of church polity and practice are becoming decreasingly culturally appropriate.

Furthermore, the calls for change that the literature above outlines have the potential to take ecclesial practices in multiple directions. Churches might be inclined to become ‘mission-shaped’ under various and perhaps even competing conceptions of what that mission is. For some, it is quite unashamedly about ‘church growth’ – in numbers, in outreach, in influence. For others, it is about preserving the faith in a postmodern age where even truth is a commodity and meaning is as open to being customized as anything else. For others still, this new era of missional ministry is one that must take churches beyond their buildings and nurture communities of disciples who live out their calling through their lives in the world. If all of this wondering about what it means to be church today remains an open question, this essay seeks to raise up one further issue for Christian communities to consider that I contend has an influence on how such attempts at reimagining churches are carried out in practice: the issue of power.

The Non-Believer and the Non-Person

One of the critiques of the creative reimagining of church life in both the U.S. and the U.K. that has emerged over the past decade is that it has paid too little attention to the margins of society. For instance, it has been argued that the Fresh Expressions movement in the Church of England is in danger of practicing a form of collusion with a ‘demand-led’ model of church, offering a ‘quasi-therapeutic blandness and over-simplistic responses to an increasingly bewildering world’.19 Thus, the Fresh Expressions movement has been characterised as largely a bourgeois phenomenon – concerned with ‘the God of the Gap’ more than the God of the poor – ‘within which there is no death, no old people, no hardship’.20

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20 Ibid. p. 34.
Whilst it is not the case that all of the developments that have sought to reimagine the church have entirely neglected those in social and economic poverty, and even recognizing that some of the more recent developments in the emergent church movement have focused more on social justice, the overall current of these movements to date has tended to co-opt too easily the customer satisfaction ethos of a prevailing consumerist culture. Given that, this essay has an ethical imperative that stands as a premise for the case that follows: that the shifts in church culture and practice that are being witnessed today need, among a variety of other concerns, to take seriously the call of Christian communities to offer a counter-cultural challenge to society that seeks the transformation of unjust social structures. Furthermore, such a calling to effect social transformation should be pursued not only out of a faithfulness to pursue justice, but because without an appreciation of the pervasive influence of exclusionary power dynamics, churches will continue to collude with structures of power that contradict and even undermine their core mission to be houses of prayer for all people. For, as theologially and ecclesiologically valid the calls are for ‘belonging by association’ and for the local church to be a ‘grace-space’ wherein non-believers might find room for their inquiring quests for God, underlying such language of spaciousness is an assumption that access to the lives of faith communities pivots on the axis of believer and non-believer. The rationale, in essence, is that churches need to have room for the difference that the non-believer presents.

As important as the spaciousness for this particular kind of difference is, what is not adequately addressed with anything like the same attentiveness is the need to have space for what liberation theologians have called the ‘non-person’ – the person who exists on the other side of power, subject to the power of others. Such people have been described by liberation theologians as ‘non-persons’, not because they don’t count as persons on a theological level, but because on many levels they are not counted, not recognised or included in the construction of civic society. Rather, they become the invisible who are written

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22 Isaiah 56:7.
out of public dialogue and whose identity and agency is rendered as of little to no worth in a consumerist society that confers value according to spending power and social mobility.

When considering how communities of faith might stand in tension with such dynamics of exclusionary societal power, typically churches have focused on programmatic responses to social poverty and exclusion: food pantries, advocacy programs, prophetic calls for churches to adopt and fight for the establishment of benchmarks for human welfare such as the Millennium Development Goals. This structural level sort of response to societal injustice is both important and a life-giving way of growth for churches as they face the diminishment of their perceived relevance to everyday life.

That said, this essay offers a paradigm-shift for churches engaged in such service to those in need that speaks directly to the quality of relating that churches have with those whom they encounter as disenfranchised in their communities. This fundamental shift might be characterised as a movement from seeing such encounters as outreach to the other, towards seeing the engagement of exclusionary power in society as a shared process of reimagining that power and the relational dynamics between the giver and the receiver. Thus, what I would argue churches need in their mission to transform unjust social structures is not only social programs of societal intervention, but a praxis that will enable such acts of reimagining to take place collaboratively: the praxis of mutuality.

Mutuality as a Postcolonial Praxis for Mission

Exactly what mutuality is understood to be, as it has been explored in the life of Christian communities, varies somewhat according to the discipline making use of it. For instance, the World Council of Churches emphasizes the role of the local church in enabling ‘mutuality in mission’ to emerge in ways that are aware of the intercultural nature of mutual relationship and agency.26 Other explorations of mutuality focus on its appreciation of difference, such as in ecclesiologies where a Trinitarian model of church is proposed as one which has room for differences within church membership and identity,27 and in the ecumenical movement where ‘mutual accountability’ is promoted in the

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pursuit of consensus over majority rule, seeking to emphasise interdependence as a way of remodeling ecumenism.\textsuperscript{28}

My own use of mutuality draws from postcolonial theory. The use of the term postcolonial here is intended to signify a ‘discourse of reactive resistance’ articulated by the ‘colonized’ via the ‘critical interrogation of dominant knowledge systems’.\textsuperscript{29} Postcolonial theory encourages a study of the power relations between centre and periphery not as between two sides of a dichotomy but as a shared space of encounter.\textsuperscript{30} The work of Homi Bhabha is particularly influential here in his notion of agency where persons act and are acted upon in the operation of what Bhabha calls a \textit{Third Space}.\textsuperscript{31} This \textit{Third Space}, the space of shared relational encounter, is not neutral; it is a space wherein identity and agency are malleable such that human subjects in relational encounters are open to self-change. Thus through this ‘Bhabian’ lens, mutuality as a postcolonial praxis is an attempt to reimagine and then renegotiate the terms of relational dynamics, functioning as both resistive and aspirational. Mutuality, therefore, is not merely a desire for right relating between persons to take place, it is a praxis that seeks to establish such relating via an intentionally incremental re-casting of those relational dynamics. What is present in this \textit{Third Space} of encounter is the struggle with what is known in postcolonial parlance as \textit{hybridity}\textsuperscript{32} wherein encounters occur and leave a ‘resistant trace’, a ‘stain’ of the subject being encountered as a sign of resistance.\textsuperscript{33} In other words, encounters in \textit{Third Space} hybridize those who encounter within it.

In a way, the praxis of mutuality is simply the reminder that the narratives by which churches articulate their common life as communities of faith are always capable of being interrupted and expanded upon by the presence of the

\textsuperscript{33} H. Bhabha, ‘The commitment to theory’ in \textit{The Location of Culture} (London & New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 49.
other whose voice also must be heard, both the ‘other’ non-believer and the ‘other’ non-person. To embrace a praxis of mutuality is to see the dividing lines of societal power less as fixed and stable barriers and more as permeable divisions that are open to being crossed and even shifted. This is so because the praxis of mutuality is one that encourages the church community to be seen as an indeterminate space, a space that is not truly claimed, in fullness, by any one party, and thus it nurtures a hybrid and a hybridizing sort of common life, one which we choose to enter into in the knowledge that we may not leave it the same that we came in. To be a church, therefore, for whom mutuality informs its identity and mission is to be a space for community where difference assembles and re-assembles the meaning of the body gathered.

How precisely such indeterminacy might be expressed in the reimagining of ecclesial communities that may seek to have space for both the non-believer and the non-person will be explored in the following sections that consider the praxis of mutuality’s potential impact on church identity, ecclesial authority, worship, and service.

Other-Oriented Identity in the Construction of Ecclesial Relational Spaces

That identity formation within communities of faith might be a shared process is inherent in their sharing of common space and action. From hymn-singing to altar calls, churches are fundamentally in the business of identity formation practices that are intentionally public. Thus, ecclesial communities are spaces by design wherein identity is formed in relation to the other: ‘The encounter of the stranger at the Lord’s Table is the beginning of life, the possibility of justification before God, the stuff of redemption...We don’t discover ourselves and our salvation by self-discovery, by looking deeper into ourselves, but in encountering the face of the other.’34 Such a view of identity as formed in relation to the other is resonate with the Greek Orthodox theologian, Zizioulas’ conception of personhood that states that there is no being as such for humans other than being as communion,35 such that it is only in communion with others that one can move from being an individual to being a true person.36

Whilst this sort of identity formation through an orientation to the other appears to be akin to the aspirational nature of mutuality, a fundamental issue that needs to be addressed vis-à-vis identity formation that is attentive to the operation of power within that formation, is the notion of a normative centre in relation to which identity is formed. Min has argued that the formation of other-oriented identity should not be seen as solidarity with the other, but ‘solidarity of the other’. That is, whilst solidarity with others implies a privileged centre or a normative perspective, solidarity of others rejects the centrality of any one group or individual. Thus, in the relational space of a solidarity of others, no one has a privileged perspective, all are others to one another.37

What this resistance to the idea of a normative centre encourages is ad hoc identity formation. Such an ad hoc practice of mutual identity formation might allow for a greater attentiveness to the power differentials that any discrete relational encounter inhabits. Churches that cultivated practices of identity formation via the postcolonial praxis of mutuality might be particularly aware of the significance of resisting normative centres of relational power and identity markers. Akin to Derrida’s notion of unconditional hospitality where to welcome the other you have to suspend the use of criteria for such welcoming,38 such churches might explore what it would mean to suspend all fixed criteria for belonging, not even belonging by association.39 Thus via the expansive use of a mutual praxis for encouraging belonging in ecclesial community, identity as formed within such a context would become a continually renegotiated reality.

To state that such a move from a membership-shaped conception of being church to an ad hoc culture of belonging, wherein the tendencies to normalise identity are continuously being resisted, might be a significant culture change for churches would be a profound understatement. With the almost exponential increase of Christian denominations and groupings along with the emergence of a myriad of independent communities of faith that have identified themselves as distinct from other ecclesial communities, a reimagining of ecclesial identity that resists the idea and exercise of a normative centre is almost inconceivable. Yet it is exactly this sort of undercutting of boundary-markers that mutuality opens up the possibility of.

38 See C. Baker, The Hybrid Church in the City: Third Space Thinking (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2007), p. 139.
To illustrate how such a reimagining could look, it might be instructive to consider the almost ubiquitous ministry practice of welcoming people at the sanctuary threshold. Such a welcome ministry that embraces the practice of resisting normative centres for belonging might conceive of those who approach the place of worship less as either members, or potential members, and more as the embodiments of a difference that holds the capacity to re-shape the whole body of Christ in that local setting. The newcomer, for example, is not welcomed ‘in’ to a perceived centre, rather they are encountered, provisionally, as a new centre in and of themselves. Thus in an almost Hindu understanding of the ‘guest as god’, the person who comes for the first time to the community of faith is to be encountered as one whose ‘assumptive world’ – all the ways by which that individual conceives of and acts in the world – when it comes into contact with another’s may alter or at least influence it.

Fulkerson has argued that such an approach to the other in the formation of ecclesial identity might be possible via the cultivation of a ‘habitus’ – postures of welcome extended to the other that are continually being reinforced and at the same time continuously capable of being renegotiated by the bodily and historical difference of the other. Indeed, such a habitus may only be open to the operation of mutuality as long as it retains a spaciousness for being-together as ‘differently abled and racialized and gendered bodied subjects’, and one might add, people of different standing socio-economically and in terms of their worldviews. Thus, such cultivation of relational space may operate with an inclination to the bodily knowledge of the other that supports an improvisatory, expanding capacity to welcome the neighbor.

The exercise of mutuality at the very threshold of Christian communities between sanctuary and street is both a practical and symbolic praxis of transformative reimagining. However, such acts of renegotiation of received relational and cultural normative centres will only affect a reimagining of ecclesial identity inasmuch as such a process of renegotiation also takes place at the level of the symbolic and theological structures that constitutes normative Christian community. It is to this arena that the next section speaks.

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40 In Sanskrit (Roman type) ‘Atithi devo bhavah’, taken from the Taittiriya Upanishad 1.11.
43 Ibid. p. 276.
44 Ibid. p. 277.
Renegotiable Authority and the ‘Liquid Church’

What the previous discussion suggested about the formation of an other-oriented identity in Christian communities is that such a formation needs to be open to the difference or the ambiguity that ‘the other’ presents. What ambiguity results in, in terms of Christian identity formation, is an understanding not of a conferred identity, but rather an understanding of identity as an event, wherein there is not an assumption of a fixed or stable form of identity, but one of identity as always under renegotiation. Within this renegotiation, where identity does not emerge pedagogically but performatively, Christian identity emerges in the agonism of the tension this difference under renegotiation produces.

What might it mean, though, if corporate identity similarly embraced such ambiguity? On one level, such an embrace might be seen to follow necessarily if the corporate body of the church community is understood as a living body made up of its ambiguity-embracing ‘members’. In this way, churches as a whole, too, might be open to renegotiation. However, would this also mean that the body’s signifier – ‘church’ – would not remain a stable or fixed symbolic and theological entity? If such an ambiguity were to be corporately expressed, then the textual voices of the Bible, the doctrines of the church, the polities of its ecclesial structures, the preaching in its pulpits, and the ritual and action-events of its worship, potentially, might all have their word returned to them by the very society such churches seek to engage with. However, for such a paradigm-shift in the communal identity of churches to become a reality, the question of authority in the proclamation of theology and the meaning of ecclesial symbols needs to be addressed.

If the production of theological expression were to be open to the praxis of a mutuality at the heart of that production then the partners in the dialogue would need to be seen fundamentally as engaging in mutual truth-seeking\(^\text{45}\) wherein authority roles rather than being fixed and built upon an archeology of subordination, might be more temporary\(^\text{46}\) and provisional. A provisionality to authority structures in communities of faith is akin to Baker’s notion of a ‘liquid church’ where power dynamics are diffused and networked.\(^\text{47}\) What such fluidity might look like in terms of church polity and the collegial practice

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\(^{46}\) Ibid. p. 162.

of ministry is highly open to interpretation, and indeed such polity and practice is more likely to emerge as local and contextually performed rather than integrated as a super-structural prescription of polity, or at least it might emerge in a creative and generative tension with such institutional structures of polity.

It is possible that such a provisionality could lead to all sorts of reimagining. For instance, in churches which hold to a practice where only ordained persons may preside at Holy Communion, the possibility of provisional presidency, sometimes held by clergy, sometimes not, might be explored. Similarly, the roles of authority in institutional structures might adopt a greater fluidity, with the traditionally fixed purview of the roles of certain individuals such as head pastors, or bishops, priests, and elders, might shift to be shared, or held for periods of time and then not for others, with an attentiveness to how a fluidity of roles and voices in the engagement of many parts of church communities might offer those communities a polyphonic texture that renders their relational spaces more porous and open to difference, even difference that has not yet presented itself.

Cultivating a polyphonic theological community is a prospect that requires a continuous attentiveness to the dynamics of relational power. This sort of polyphony might encourage church communities to explore how their relationship to common texts for worship and polity, such as the Missal, the Book of Common Prayer or the Book of Order, might be reimagined as living documents that remain open to re-iteration and re-interpretation. Yet, such a polyphony is only truly possible if the dynamics of who gets to have a voice in church communities is seriously addressed. To engage a praxis of mutuality in theological expression would be to explore how a shared process of talk about God might work with the challenges of theological and linguistic literacy, the relation of socio-economic status to group dynamics, and the role of church leaders as facilitators of theological articulation as much as they are proclaimers of it. In all of this is the prospect of theological production emerging in an unending process of renegotiation, or Midrash, whereby antagonistic or contradictory elements are negotiated through agonistic but also pragmatic dialogue that will lead to new hybrid discourses and identities.48

The implications for such an open-ended process of theological production and re-iteration for conventional church practices such as the declaration of creeds, preaching of sermons, or the other teaching and formational ministries of churches are far-reaching. For instance, when rites of initiation such as baptism and confirmation are considered, how the tradition is entered into

48 See Ibid. p. 21.
dialogue with might have ramifications not only for the preparations for such rites, but for the practice and interpretation of the rites themselves. Whilst it is the case presently that sacramental rites already contain a vast array of meanings for different individuals and church communities, the question of whose voice is authoritative in the negotiation of such interpretations is pivotal to the spaciousness that those rites retain without losing their signification entirely to a postmodern decimation of all definitive signification.

How such a tension is retained without fracturing the whole is of course the very question that several church denominations are answering currently in relation to human sexuality. In this regard, I would argue that it is in its inherent commitment to the whole that the praxis of mutuality may offer most value to many churches today. Indeed, it is mutuality’s commitment to the subject position of each partner in relational dialogue that prevents its indeterminacy from deteriorating into nihilism. The next section explores how such a commitment to dialogue holds out an extensive potential for mutuality’s reimagining of worship and service ministries in today’s churches.

Worship and Service as the Sharing of Mutual Relational Space

One of the most enduring ways that church communities communicate their values is in how they order their physical and liturgical gatherings. The strength of attachment to signs of ecclesiastical cultural significance such as pews and hymn books can be even greater than direct theological production, perhaps because these signs have become so strongly associated with talk about God in any given particular setting that it can be very hard to separate one from the other. Indeed, liturgical and architectural space matter in church communities on multiple levels, not least in their communication of meaning and access. The level of this significance has not been lost on those who would argue that the use of such spaces must be re-considered if church buildings and what happens in them are to reflect their perceived purpose. For instance, it has been argued that for church buildings and the worship within them to be spaces of sanctuary necessarily means living with liminality, a liminality that holds the possibility of change, of openness, of transition and of ambiguity, such that the sanctuary is the safe place in which people’s experience of societal liminality can be spoken of and valued.49

49 C. McBeath, ’Chapter 10: Sanctuary and Liminality: Stories, Reflections, and Liturgy exploring the blurred encounters between mental health and illness as an inner-city
Such a liminal space for liturgy is along the lines of what Baker encourages church communities to do in the curating of worship wherein the worship leader makes a context and frame for worship, arranging elements within it, whilst the content of worship is provided by others.\textsuperscript{50} As Baker describes, ‘Worship duration, drawing inspiration from the world of contemporary art, creates spaces: for encounter, for experience, for reflection, to change speeds, for prayer, for questions, for exploration, for meditation, for provocation, for moments of epiphany. Creativity and imagination are brought to bear to open up encounters between God, art, worship and the people’\textsuperscript{51}

How such curating might be attentive to the dynamics of power in those spaces being curated is of course essential to how much mutuality is exercised in the act of worship. The vision of eucharistic hospitality that Oduyoye sees constructed by the praxis of mutuality respects the gifts and experiences that the other brings.\textsuperscript{52} It is this kind of supplemental vision for liturgical space that Drucker talks of in his desire to see the work of the people in liturgy as disruptive: ‘If we can imagine a whole liturgy – not just a homily – that disrupts as much as it consoles, that offers us alternative images, that reshapes the way we imagine, that enables us to react violently against the forces, internal and external, that enslave us, then we shall be on the way to a new state of seeing and being.’\textsuperscript{53} One way that liturgical space and action has been shaped to nurture this sense both of the disruptive and hospitable is through the use of ‘open spaces’. The ‘Open Space’ is an opportunity for people to have room to think, reflect, pray or simply be, often enabled by a series of stations around the building making a connection between theology and everyday life. What these open spaces also contain is a shift in authority to teach and learn from one individual to many, elevating the significance of personal experience and welcoming multiple perspectives.

Other ways that liturgical space has been explored that can be seen to be more reflective of mutuality is in the architecture of gathering. For instance, it has been argued that one of the most significant impediments to mutual liturgical space is the presence of pews set out, as they are most commonly, in

\begin{footnotes}
\item[51] Ibid. p. 7.
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linear form. Kavanagh makes the case strongly, ‘Pews, which entered liturgical space only recently, nail the assembly down, proclaiming that the liturgy is not a common action but a preachment perpetrated upon the seated, an ecclesiastical opera done by virtuosi for a paying audience. Pews distance the congregation, disenfranchise the faithful, and rend the assembly.’ When such liturgical spaces have been evaluated for re-ordering, some have argued for a new architecture that privileges the relational via a seating arrangement that enhances a sense of interdependence and community rather than individual people at prayer. Such a sense is often achieved by seating plans that are circular, oval, or square, rather than linear.

The gradations of access into liturgical spaces are perhaps more plentiful than in any other area of church life. From pews, to altar rails, rood screens, high altars, designated seating for clerical and secular authorities, designated words and speaking roles for the ordained over the laity, forms of clothing and a myriad of other ways by which liturgical space and practice is ordered can all in their respective ways function as exclusionary forces in the relational space of church communities. Not surprisingly, then, it is here in the arena of liturgical space and practice that there can be the most resistance – both institutional and local, ordained and lay – to change. Yet, by the same measure, it is here in the ordering and use of church buildings that churches may need to do most imaginative work if the relational spaces of ecclesial communities are to be spaces of prayer for all peoples.

In the final aspect of reimagining church that this essay considers – the praxes of service – this spaciousness for all peoples is perhaps particularly significant. Whilst the history of evangelism oriented to the perceived exterior of church communities has had a troubling track record in its collusion with colonial power and the ‘civilizing mission’ of the growth of empire that saw theological frames of reference and practices imposed, sometimes by force, on individuals and communities, the operation of service ministries in the local and international reach of churches has also practiced a form of collusion with exclusionary power albeit at a more subtle and perhaps unwitting level. Take, for example the classic conception of service ministry as ‘outreach’. From food pantries to developing world church-led construction projects, service as outreach is more often than not something that is done to others. It is a case of solidarity for the poor; actions carried out on their behalf. In such

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arrangements, the openings for reciprocity are either scarce or they are decided beforehand by the party initiating the service outreach. What such a construction of relational space ends up producing is not real relational dialogue, but what Bakhtin calls ‘a sham struggle, decided in advance’.\(^{56}\)

As an alternative to such normative expressions of service ministry, Dharmaraj urges churches to adopt a mutuality that seeks to ‘recognize the differences between the two partners involved and searches for permanent or at least long-lasting ways to connect the two partners without destroying differences’.\(^{57}\) Dharmaraj goes on to state that mutuality occurs when all partners intentionally seek to work together for a common cause and form a relationship or commitment that is tactical, strategic, and is entered into for the common benefit of all. Such a relational dynamic is always open to redefinition and updates in the nature of the relationship between the partners.\(^{58}\)

Taking up explicitly postcolonial terminology, Baker presents hybridity as a praxis for churches to re-order the ways by which they form partnerships in ministry. He characterizes such churches as those which blur the boundaries via the emergence of ‘flexible, multidisciplinary and partnership-based approaches within increasingly contested and polarized spaces to achieve solutions that work in the absence of overarching methodologies and ideologies’.\(^{59}\) Such a space for shared ministry is counter-hegemonic and constantly evolving and changing.\(^{60}\) How church communities might learn to listen to and for the story of the other in such expressions of service is pivotal to the postcolonial hope that this essay has been exploring for communities of faith to become churches of spaciousness for all.

**Conclusion**

To invite the possibility that church communities might reimagine what it means to belong without a normative centre whilst still retaining a distinctive Christian voice, or to see the rites of churches as acts of theological production


\(^{58}\) Ibid. p. 37.


that are open for reiteration, or to see ecclesiastical authority as something that is more provisional than fixed, is not to invite something easy but something deeply challenging for communities of faith. They are challenging possibilities because they seek to invite the renegotiation of what it means to be church in an era of institutional decline and social disinclination to organised religion. Yet, this possibility of reimagining relational life holds out a substantial hope for churches to render their dynamics of power more diffuse and to become increasingly the communities of transformation that their vocation calls them to be. Furthermore, I would contend that mutuality as a postcolonial praxis for mission in the life of churches offers a vital tool for that reimagining to become a tangible reality.