

Assist our Song: Music Ministries in the Local Church, Douglas Galbraith (Saint Andrew Press, 2021); ISBN 978 1 80083 010 3

Written for those with responsibility for leading and shaping public worship, *Assist Our Song* is a rich and welcome resource. At a time of immense upheaval and change in the life of the churches, the author reassuringly exudes positivity: the resounding emphasis is on renewal rather than decline. Many years in the making, Douglas Galbraith skilfully and refreshingly draws upon the wisdom of different denominations, including the Church of Scotland, the Church of England, the Roman Catholic Church, and the United Reformed Church. The breadth of expertise shared in this book includes that of clergy, organist, musicologist, spiritual director, and praise band leader. The work is accessible, informative, and eloquent.

The practical application and advice offered in this publication is underpinned by the psychology and spirituality of public worship. Worship as theatre is explored imaginatively: at its best, the public praise of God is a creative and sensitive blend of the visual together with word, silence, and movement. In worship, we seek to transcend our ordinary lives, experience the ‘inward sound’ and, equally, ‘recognise ourselves’ in and through the liturgy, however elaborate or simple. In the words of the sixth century Syrian mystic, Dionysius, we are ‘to be at one with God’.

Alongside numerous historical, interesting, and enlightening anecdotes, Douglas celebrates the high calling of music. He suggests that singing, something perhaps which we take for granted, is a means of creating community, embodying our desire for connectedness, and requiring us to listen to others. Music enhances meaning: not only does music evoke memories and place beauty at the heart of worship but, as composers and singers, we become co-creators with God. The fourth century Coptic saint, St Basil of Caesarea, sought to educate the soul through blending ‘the delight of melody with doctrines’.

Douglas offers a brief history of the use of psalms in worship, starting with the Gospels and across the centuries to the Reformation, and also their remodelling as hymns. In church circles, some who prefer traditional music in worship do not always appreciate contemporary worship music, and *vice versa*. With genuine respect for a breadth of styles, Douglas acknowledges the importance

of balance in putting together a service of worship while, at the same time, points out the danger of thinking that a particular style or type of music will automatically solve a problem, such as the lack of younger people at Sunday services.

Very helpfully, ministers and worship leaders who are not musicians are encouraged to take responsibility for music in worship. Hymns enshrine every mode of prayer, and the careful choice of words and accompanying music is vital. We are also encouraged to be mindful of our movement: our bearing in worship, or bodily presence, as it communicates in some degree the extent to which the entire worship activity is to be taken seriously. There is also honesty about the spiritual life of the minister or worship leader: there will be times when we feel spiritually nourished and strong, and times when we feel only the absence of God.

Assist Our Song begins with the opening verse of the hymn, ‘Ye holy angels bright’, from which the book’s title is drawn. Penned by the seventeenth century poet, hymnodist and theologian, Richard Baxter, the worshipper invokes the angels who wait at God’s right hand to ‘assist our song’. In this work, Douglas surely assists and enriches our conduct of public worship. Experienced minister, worship leader or probationer, this book is a worthwhile resource and will be of certain benefit.

Scott McKenna

Being involved both in church music, and as an advisor in matters relating to the repair and maintenance of pipe organs, I was glad to have the opportunity to explore the contents of this publication.

Described as “an essential handbook for making the most of music in our worship”, the coverage of those issues that a church musician might encounter on their own journey is comprehensive, constructive, and above all imbued with the cumulative wisdom of the writer’s own considerable experience. It is difficult to read this book without contemplating how useful it would have been to have had such a publication available decades earlier, when this reader was starting out and in many ways left to his own devices, particularly in light

of those chapters dealing with “the accompaniment of hymns”, “playing the words”, “other tricks of the trade” and more.

Given my own background in working with pipe organs, there is an inevitable pull to the chapter heading “what kind of organ?” which sets out a brief summary of the evolution of the instrument in Scotland. A technical summary of the varying mechanical and musical characteristics of the instrument includes descriptions of stops and their primary functions, and the significance of their differing pitches. Matters of conservation, repair and replacement of pipe organs are also dealt with in a concise and objective way which is welcome, including those observations relating to digital organs (this an occasionally troubling subject among organists).

As a source of unique insight – drawn from a lifetime’s experience, and also for helpful practical advice, this publication is wholeheartedly recommended.

Matthew Hynes

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TELLING A BETTER STORY: Mission in Contemporary Scotland, Liam Jerrold Fraser, (St Andrew Press: 2021), £24.99, ISBN: 978 1 80083 020 2

This book could not be better timed. Current restructuring measures may have been masked by the Covid pandemic but there is little doubt about their radical nature as the church scrambles to match its resources to its task, now and for the future. That this should not be seen as merely a raft of fiscal strategies but a movement of the Spirit will surely be one outcome of this new book from the St Andrew Press. Liam Jerrold Fraser writes from a breadth of experience of ministry and mission, from being the first ordained pioneer minister in the Church of Scotland to his present post as minister of one of the Church's most historic charges, St Michael's Linlithgow. He has also recently become Convener of the General Assembly's Theological Forum, and this publication not only provides a sound theological underpinning for the current responses of the churches to a growing crisis (shared by several denominations across the UK) but also offers a goal and a compass to better shape and focus the work in hand.

The book is in three sections: background, context, and practice. The first goes well beyond its modest heading – in that far from simply being a setting for what follows it immediately 'delivers' as throwing light on the contemporary situation. In the centuries following the Scottish Protestant Reformation the 'parish state' enfolded the whole population, providing not just religious ritual but schooling, social care, poor relief, the dispensing of justice locally, and serving also to define social acceptability. In that sense, no-one was outside the church. Those who resisted or ignored it were seen as bad or deficient Christians rather than non-Christians to be converted. There was therefore no requirement to 'spread the gospel' beyond the church.

However, since then a number of factors have combined to break the hold of the church and bring about the secularisation of society. Industrialisation and the move to the cities caused people to leave behind the customs and obligations of the tighter rural communities, offering anonymity and freedom. The Disruption and earlier schisms created communities un beholden to the established church, while education and other necessities of life passed to secular authorities. In religious terms, the decline of Calvinism, the rise of biblical criticism, and the 19th century doctrine which promoted the belief that

the Kingdom of God was not exclusively in the bailiwick of the Kirk but could be advanced through the medium of secular agencies by a God who worked at large – all these factors combined to reduce people's need of the church.

The second section of the book examines the social, political and spiritual contexts of present-day secular Scotland. *Socially*, welfare security, affluence, and consumerism have enabled new secular identities. Old moral structures have given way to a focus on self-authenticity and on personal freedom. Thus people have less reason – if any at all – to turn to the church. Mobility and electronic media displace the Christian focus on long-term relationships and physical gathering; wellbeing is achieved without the need for tradition, community, family. *Politically*, an earlier emphasis on Union and Empire is replaced by Nationalism which offers the possibility of a new political movement that supersedes the old conflicts between socialism and capitalism, Protestant and RC – a politics for a *new Scotland* that unites Scots around the one thing they have in common: Scotland itself. As religion has declined in importance as a source of unity and identity so the role of national pride has increased. *Spiritually*, the most defining aspect is idolatry, the revering of material and worldly things. In effect, people have adopted a humanism, with its affirmation of the goodness of human nature and the power of human potential, a 'creed' which offers transcendence through close relationships and the idea of humanity, the unconditional worth of people through the celebration of life and dignity, and the significance of narratives and meanings they forge from themselves. As Dr Fraser remarks, if the majority are living without God, they are not living without hope.

Readers may feel both relief and despair at this narrative. There is relief because this clear analysis of the changing nature of the church's relationship to society lifts something of the guilt that we so often feel about our poor performance when it comes to sharing our faith with others, showing how far, on the one hand, this is a pattern we have inherited and, on the other, that this is a situation brought about by factors outwith our control. There may also be despair about the scale and complexity of the task. Yet we are not left rudderless as the author at several points names the flaws and weak points in contemporary ideologies and experience which provide an opening for the church to 'tell another story'. How does the church today position itself to share the alternative Christian hope of a new creation? In the final section, entitled 'Practice', the author

examines aspects of the life of the contemporary church: service, evangelism, and public witness, and makes concrete suggestions as to how we may respond to the world in which we now live. *Service* is one of the most notable ways that the church engages with and is known by people at large, given so effectively by congregations and partner organisations. Here Fraser argues against the common view that to carry out such costly service is eloquent enough in itself. Full obedience is only when this service is wedded to Christian witness. We should not confuse secular for theological ends. *Evangelism* is needed to complete this outreach by pointing to the ultimate meaning of Christian service. We have to partner this with the other great commission to make disciples of all nations, which means inviting people into worshipping communities, the surest context for old and new disciples to grow. Our concern is not only for people but for institutions, and in a searching chapter on *public witness* the author challenges the church to discover a much more effective form of ecumenical life.

Proposals

The problem arises when people find the culture of the church to be alien to the culture in which they feel most at home, with the result that they too quickly default to the normal. It is at this point that the author commends a possible pattern for the future life of the church, one of a ‘mixed ecology’, the creation of various versions of ‘fresh expressions’ parallel to the structure of parish churches. It is a strategy that is also being currently advanced, against a backdrop of controversy, in the Church of England where the Archbishop of York has called for 10,000 new lay-led worshipping communities. Fraser approaches this carefully, discussing and assessing the various critiques that have accompanied a form which already has a hold south of the Border where, as he notes, it now accounts for 15% of C of E congregations. For him, a fresh expressions approach not only attracts in providing an experience more in tune with the culture with which people are familiar and offering more congenial company (he notes that the most successful forms of FE are those that involve families), but also – its prime reason – it enables people to become *worshippers*. He emphasises that the purpose and end of mission is worship, and that in the worshipping community is found the best ground for growing disciples. Worship is an act of mission in its own right, a resource for mission, and the very life of mission.

The author is fully aware, however, that in the push to be accessible and relevant we can jettison important elements of our theology and liturgy to the point that we forget who we are. If we proceed by disposing of anything that keeps the unchurched from coming, we can ‘empty the church of structure, ordination, communion, religious symbols, liturgy and almost all theology.’ Rather, he would see the traditional adopting elements of fresh expressions into congregational life and fresh expressions taking on some of characteristics of inherited church. The author uses two helpful analogies to capture the relationship of the FEs to inherited forms: the lifeboats of a sinking Titanic, the seeds to ensure a genus survives the winter, and in the course of this emphasises that in this dispersal the DNA of the church must remain intact. Yet, as he acknowledges, such a mixed ecology will necessarily move resources away from the inherited church and notes that ‘church leaders in the traditional denominations know that it is not a question of *if* inherited forms of Church will one day cease to be but only *when*.’

New conversations

An innovative feature of the publication is that a Facebook page, blog and website has been created¹ for readers to continue discussing the issues raised and to take the matter of mission in contemporary Scotland further. One might suggest also that the book may give rise to new conversations in the Church Service Society. Three come to mind.

First, might inherited forms of worship have within them the seeds of renewal already? Historically, this has been the case, with the tropes in medieval times that prevented worship from ossifying, rendering it open to new themes and practices – in the case of the *Quem quaeritis* trope making a lasting contribution to the culture of society in spreading the germ of drama – or the refocusing of worship at the Reformation. Is there a sense in which inherited liturgies are the church’s DNA? Might the inherited also be capable of converting: Evensong is sometimes identified today as attracting those who otherwise find nothing in church life to detain them, while there have been church plants based round a choir. However, there is nevertheless a need to tackle radical questions, unavoidably raised in the recent experience of digital worship. Questions of presence (divine, and the sense of presence felt by a gathered people), of the

1 www.missioninscotland.wordpress.com

difference between the corporate and the corporeal, of eucharistic participation, of the digital and the carnal, are among those raised by virtual worship. More seriously, in spite of times when the ‘worship within the worship’ broke through, there is the undeniable fact that within inherited liturgies there are the sounds and concepts of a static and stratified medieval world.² This enquiry is overdue and in a digital world has become urgent.

A second conversation might focus on the resourcing and development of worship in an FE context. Experience suggests that in more informal gatherings ‘times of worship’ can be fairly *ad hoc* and word-based, the music without challenge. The weight now being placed on the ability of fresh expressions to create missional disciples of understanding, energy, and spiritual depth will require communities which grow towards maturity in Christ and worship which opens both towards the transcendent and out to embrace the world in the depth of its need. Tradition shows us that worship, rather than being a sequence of events is a ‘surround’, an environment in which encounter can take place. Yet it is a carefully crafted environment, with words chosen advisedly, polyvalent rituals working at different levels, all the senses invited to bring their riches, many artistic languages summoned: music, stained-glass, floral display, hymns, dance, sculpture – crafted, but for the purpose of releasing spontaneity.³ Liturgy finds beauty as well as truth at its heart. The question arises, how can worship of this scope be encouraged in the new communities, what resources required, what support provided?

The third conversation applies to both strands outlined above. In discussing the decline of Calvinism, the author notes that the place of catechism was lost to the church, and with it a conscious development of personal discipleship, which now must be recovered in the new and continuing worshipping communities. Prior to the Reformation, around half of all sermons derived from liturgy.⁴ This is a practice now largely absent, and one of the themes now ‘trending’ among liturgiologists is the issue of ‘liturgical formation’, the need in our day to enable

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- 2 See further Thomas R Whelan in ‘Negotiating Sacrament Today: Notes for a Prolegomenon, *Anaphora* (the journal of the Society for Liturgical Study)’, especially pp 38-9.
 - 3 There are references here to a paper given at the 2021 Congress of *Societas Liturgica*, not yet available in print: François Cassingena-Trévedy, *Liturgy as Poiesis*, translated from the French by Robert Kelly.
 - 4 See further Stephen Mark Holmes, *Sacred Signs in Reformation Scotland: Interpreting Worship, 1488-1590* (Oxford University Press: 2015).

worship to inform and develop both the personal and public life of those who attend worship. What contemporary forms might this earlier practice take? The three sections end with a 'takeaway', where the rich fare of the book is condensed into a *vade mecum*, and this is followed by our marching orders, 'What next?'. Fraser writes with energy and with clarity. The first chapter, setting out a missional theology, is essential reading, and, within it, his account of the Trinity at the heart of God's mission is written with economy and beauty.

Douglas Galbraith

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is a past president and former secretary of the Church Service Society. After a varied career in pastoral, teaching, and administrative work in Scotland and Australia he continues in retirement in research and writing, particularly in the area of church music, and has become involved in the pilgrim routes movement in Scotland.