

Book Review

Northern Lights: Resurrecting Church in the North of England

Jason Byassee

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Jason Byassee has written a different type of book. It is above all a piece of journalism, but one situated somewhere in a conversation between ecclesiology, sociology, cultural geography and reflection on leadership. Byassee describes it this way, in a passage that captures fairly well the feel of the book:

I work as a kind of impressionistic researcher. I don't do hard research or sociology or ethnography. I'm a journalist, following my nose and asking questions. I'm also a theologian ... I'm writing about places that interest me and trying to discern patterns.

The book emerged out of the seven months Byassee spent based in Durham, and touring the North of England (the North-East in particular). In this time he visited a wide array of churches, worshipping with them and conducting interviews (are they simply conversations?) with leaders and congregants. The book consists of eight pieces of reflection: some of the contexts are merged with others (some examples of various fresh expressions for example), whilst others are longer, sustained accounts (a single chapter on Durham cathedral). Each chapter ends with a brief 'patterns' section, an attempt to draw together some threads and offer constructive learnings from the reflections. The book begins with a nuanced introduction, which explores some of the tensions Byassee is seeking to hold together through his accounts.

If there is a theme to all of this – where on earth would one start in accounting for church in the North? – it is growth. Byassee makes this clear in the introduction: sent by a North American denomination ('Canadian Presbyterians'), his goal is to explore moments of growth in an otherwise declining ecclesial landscape, so as to learn from one context for another. The reflections then focus in on situations where Byassee has perceived something to be happening. 'There is energy there', he writes, 'something worth detecting, either for good or ill. What is it exactly?' From this basis, Byassee takes us on an eclectic and rapid tour. Archbishop Sentamu's evangelistic endeavours, city-centre Alpha driven resource churches, large, small and medium parish churches, Hillsong, fresh expressions, para-



church missional projects, Cathedrals. Charismatic, middle of the road Anglican, conservative, liturgical and informal.

As an impressionistic account, the author avoids offering any tightly conceived themes. A few do emerge however. Starting with growth, given that this is his declared interest, Byassee frequently returns to the mantra that ‘churches that aim to grow, grow.’ A highlight of the book however is the nuance Byassee gives to this phenomenon. ‘Aiming to grow’ does look like well thought-through strategic planning in some instances (the resource church plants, the Alpha courses), whereas in others, it is more about deliberate openness; an attitude of expectation. Second, and related, Byassee highlights – as if we ever needed reminding – that ‘growth’ is multi-faceted. The book demonstrates that there can be no one-size-fits-all agenda and, importantly, that growth can therefore happen in any ecclesial context. Thirdly, the book is about the messiness of missional activity, and even of the seeming ‘success’ of growth. Byassee seeks to show how the fact that God may have been at work in a context does not mean that everything there is well, or that it will be indefinitely. He thus returns repeatedly to the fact that God may be ‘up to something’ in and amongst both obvious human failings (he gives good space to the Cathedral’s chequered history for example), as well as simple ecclesial clumsiness and/or ignorance. There is then a hopeful, even optimistic, tone to the book. Sentamu’s evangelistic sermon may well be from a different era, clunky and clichéd possibly, but, in the middle of it, there is a moment of deep profundity.

The three themes are therefore undergirded by a certain tone that marks the book, which we might describe as *critically hopeful*. Critical – because Byassee does not shy away from the controversies and complexities of mission and evangelism – but hopeful, because he is consistently searching for where God is at work. On these, his own terms, Byassee is ultimately successful: this is a book which I enjoyed, and which encouraged me in my own missional work and research. It would be fair to say that if more Christian writers – and especially those who write about the church’s activity and mission – at least started here, then our conversation would be in a far better (and wiser?) state. Specifically, I do think that Byassee is on to something important in implicitly suggesting that one way of avoiding many of the ecclesiological and missiological polarities we find ourselves within is by actually spending time with churches and real goings-on. In Byassee’s account, many of the standard dichotomies that consume missiology and ecclesiology are relativized. We see from these churches that intentionality is not opposed to ‘being with’. ‘Growth’ does not have to stem from modernity’s obsession with counting things; good leadership does not mean managerialism; small and traditional does not mean dying; the church is both deeply implicated in the messy realities of the world, and yet also – somehow still – a counter-cultural community. Critical questioning does not necessitate cynicism. One final strength of the book: Byassee opens our eyes to some often-overlooked features of the ecclesial landscape. The fact that ‘fuzzy fidelity’ is not as prevalent in the North-East as many claim,

for example, or that the racial, cultural, and social diversity which exists in many of the newer churches far exceeds that of most of the established ones.

As well as some clumsiness in the editing (a number of repetitions of content), there are some obvious methodological questions to be asked of the book. As the quotation at the start of this review suggests, Byassee is well aware of what it is he has set out to achieve, and he does not overpromise. This is not a piece of qualitative research, and it is certainly not ethnography. However, we should ask what role such a book should then play in our ecclesiological and missiological conversations. My claim thus far has been that the book sets a helpful *tone* for that conversation. The harder part is working out whether it can offer anything by way of shaping missional *activity*. Certainly, the weakest parts of the book are the 'patterns' sections: the evidence is simply too loose to warrant constructing general principles. Ultimately, a journalistic approach such as this thus leaves us struggling to offer genuine questioning. Yes, there may have been a significant moment in Sentamu's sermon, but what do we do with this: Is there ever such a thing as bad evangelism, or bad church praxis, even if some of the outcomes are perceived to be 'good'? Thus, once it has been enjoyed, the questions Byassee's book leaves us with are these: what are our standards of judgement? And how do we appropriately evaluate the church, for the purpose of more faithful practice?