

Anthony B. Robinson, *Changing the Conversation: A Third Way for Congregations* (Grand Rapids and Cambridge: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2008), pp. 199, £11.99, ISBN 978-0-8028-0759-5 (pbk).

Changing the Conversation is a sequel to Anthony Robinson's recent books *Transforming Congregational Culture* (2003) and *What's Theology Got to Do with It? Convictions, Vitality, and the Church* (2006). It builds upon and complements work done by a variety of theologians who have advocated for the church to find 'a third way' beyond stereotyped polarities all-too-typical of its life. The work seeks a reformation of church in its defining narrative; that is, in the divine economy. Robinson invites congregations to rediscover fresh language, which includes a rediscovery of 'older words and concepts of the living tradition of our faith' (p. 2); to develop new conceptual frameworks; formulate new agendas and imaginings for being and doing church; and foster new ways of framing both internal and external challenges and relations.

Robinson has served as an ordained Minister of the United Church of Christ and remains in touch with the realities of congregational life. He understands that change is an inevitable and indispensable part of congregational life, that good leaders know and embrace this, and that healthy change involves ceasing the typically dead-end conversations that congregations engage in, embracing reality accurately, and framing the challenges adequately. Drawing upon Ron Heifetz's distinction between technical problems and adaptive challenges, this book is shaped around ten conversations that Robinson believes are requisite in order to develop and sustain congregational and denominational life.

The opening chapter maps some of the important historical and cultural shifts that have shaped, and been shaped by, Christendom, and how the emergence of a post-Christendom North America is impacting historically mainline Protestant congregations and their ministry from one of chaplaincy to one of mission.

How congregations might respond creatively to the challenges and opportunities of this post-Christendom situation is the subject of chapter two. Rather than denying or bemoaning the sea change, Robinson asks if congregations might find a way to discern God at work among them and respond by birthing new and more productive conversations and hopeful, engaged responses. The third chapter, 'A New Heart', is an invitation to think about how the renewal of hearts and minds is at the centre of mainline Protestant congregations; renewal is not reducible to a formula or recipe, and is always more important than any technique or programme.

In chapter four, Robinson turns to the issue of leadership. He defines pastoral leadership as 'mobilizing a congregation . . . to engage its own most pressing problems and deepest challenges' (p. 84). Part of the task of leadership (and that not limited to the ordained) is to read the context and congregation, to name and describe the challenges accurately, and to 'remind a congregation (or other group) of its theologically and biblically informed purpose and core values. In other words, leadership should keep before the congregation the core value: "who are we?" and the purpose: "why are we here?"'

(pp. 85–6). Robinson observes that many congregations suffer a 'leadership vacuum'; instead of pastoral leaders and governing boards, they have chaplains and a group that is either 'listening to endless reports or trying to micro-manage the operational administration of the congregation' (p. 96). 'The future', he continues, 'belongs to congregations that call and empower pastors who are leaders, and then also call and prepare governing boards that provide effective policy direction and leadership' (*ibid.*), which directly raises the question of purpose.

The concern of chapter five, the 'why are we here?' question, is, according to Robinson, always the most important question. He avers that congregations need reasonable clarity about their core purpose if they are to foster any new vitality and to shift, as Michael Foss believes, from 'a culture of membership to a culture of discipleship' (p. 101). In making the important distinction between purpose and vision, Robinson, following C. Kirk Hadaway, contends that purpose is more important than vision, the former precedes and shapes the latter, because 'without a fairly clear sense of purpose, congregations can get caught up in the game of cultural catch-up or what's newest and latest' (p. 105).

Robinson continues to labour this distinction and its logic of priority in chapters six to eight. In chapter six, the concern is to explore the relationship between vision and purpose, of how congregations move from naming their *raison d'être* to identifying the key challenges and then authoring a vision statement or strategic plan that serves their ministry. One vital emphasis here is that the work of the congregation does not fall to experts or authorities, nor to the pastor, a consultant or a small group designated to solve the problems. Rather, Robinson insists that 'it is the people with the problem themselves, the people facing the challenge, who do the work. If the work is "discovering again God's purpose (mission) for our church," we can't simply assign that to a mission committee' (p. 122). While he acknowledges that most congregations face a combination of technical problems and adaptive challenges, to the extent that they understand those challenges as technical problems only, they will fail. Moreover, they would have 'missed important, God-given opportunities to experience new hearts and minds' (p. 123).

In some ways chapter seven represents the book's thesis most clearly: that the governance and organization that many congregations are working with are outmoded and incompetent because they are designed for a Christendom that is rapidly passing away. Then, the eighth chapter attends to another arena of adaptive work facing mainline congregations; namely, public theology. It asks what shape and what voice the church might embody in the public square in an age of redefined relations. 'Death and Resurrection' is the title of chapter nine. Here Robinson suggests that while, for some situations, congregational renewal is possible, sometimes a death—or something that looks and feels very much like death—is required before a resurrection is possible. Then, the final chapter looks to the future: where to now?

Changing the Conversation will be read with profit by all those interested in congregational life and leaders of congregations. It offers a clear vocalization of some

important theses and synthesizes some valuable material on mission and vision. Nevertheless, some readers will question whether Robinson offers a decisive enough severing from the Christendom mind-set that he is so properly concerned about. At the very least, the book's pages frequently require some translation from a North American congregational context into other local dialects. Finally, how one assesses this book depends largely on whether one is seeking a handbook of tools or the means to renew ecclesiological imagination. While there are some indications that Robinson is seeking to offer both, it is more of the former than the latter that is to be found in this book.

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