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# Anabaptist Church Planting in Britain

Stuart Murray

## A Change of Strategy

In March 2020, a few days before the British government belatedly announced a lockdown in response to the COVID-19 pandemic that was already sweeping the country, representatives of the Anabaptist Mennonite Network met in Birmingham to consider a proposal to plant new Anabaptist churches. We reaffirmed our commitment to work with Christians of all traditions and denominations, to continue offering resources to individuals and communities interested in learning from the Anabaptist tradition. But we also agreed the time seemed right to attempt to plant churches with explicit Anabaptist values and practices. The impact of the pandemic and further lockdowns delayed the implementation of this decision, but the initiative has gained momentum and the first new Anabaptist communities are starting to emerge.

This decision represents a significant change of strategy. North American Mennonite mission workers, who established the London Mennonite Centre in 1953 and laid the foundations for the emergence of an indigenous Anabaptist

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movement in Britain, had adopted a policy of not planting Anabaptist or Mennonite churches. The priority, they believed, was to offer the insights and resources of the Anabaptist tradition to any and all Christians; setting up new churches might appear competitive and hinder their ability to interact with many others.

The Centre initially offered accommodation to international students who struggled to find housing at a time when racism precluded many other options. Subsequently, the Centre developed as a teaching and resource center—running courses, providing a well-stocked library, and offering many opportunities for informal conversations, often over meals. The Anabaptist Network, founded in 1992, worked closely with the London Mennonite Centre and embraced the same policy of not attempting to plant churches. As a result, the Network has attracted, resourced, and connected Christians from many traditions. Until recently, the Anabaptist Mennonite Network,<sup>1</sup> formed from a merger of the Anabaptist Network and the London Mennonite Trust after the closure of the London Mennonite Centre in 2010, has also refrained from planting churches.

Despite this, some Anabaptist churches and communities were established in the UK. There are currently eleven Brethren in Christ churches<sup>2</sup> in various locations across England and Wales, with plans to plant more churches over the coming years. These churches, the first of which was established in London over forty years ago, are almost entirely Zimbabwean in membership but are eager to become multi-ethnic. Although this denomination acknowledges Evangelical, Methodist, and Pietist roots as well as an Anabaptist heritage, their churches in Britain self-identify as Anabaptist and are increasingly becoming strongly integrated into the Anabaptist Mennonite Network.

There is also a Portuguese-speaking Mennonite church in Eastbourne, on the south coast of England. Comprising Brazilians, Portuguese, Angolans, and others, the church was planted by Brazilian students over twenty years ago.

There are two Bruderhof communities in the southeast of England—one in East Sussex and the other in East Kent. These common-purse communities are branches of an international movement founded in Germany in the 1920s, with similarities to and sporadic connections with the Hutterites. They are by far the largest Anabaptist groups in the UK, although they currently have very few British members and seem unable to attract more.<sup>3</sup>

There was also one other Mennonite church, initially known as the London Mennonite Fellowship and later as Wood Green Mennonite Church. This church, an exception to the policy of not planting churches, emerged from the ministry of the London Mennonite Centre and was integrally connected with the community and activities there. For some years the church thrived, but despite its efforts to

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1 See Anabaptist Mennonite Network website at <https://amnetwork.uk/>.

2 BICC Congregations in the UK, <http://westmidbicc.org/bicc-near-you/>.

3 See Bruderhof website at [www.bruderhof.com](http://www.bruderhof.com).

become rooted in a local neighborhood and more missional, the church remained heavily dependent on the Centre and closed quite soon after the Centre was sold.

Although not explicitly Anabaptist, Urban Expression is viewed by some observers and by many of those involved as a mission agency with Anabaptist values and practices. Launched in 1997 and prioritizing marginalized urban neighborhoods across the UK, Urban Expression recruits, deploys, supports, and networks mission partners in many locations. Some of these are planting churches, others have set up community projects or social enterprises, and all are committed to long-term incarnational ministry.<sup>4</sup> Many of those at the heart of this mission movement espouse Anabaptist convictions and have links with the Anabaptist Mennonite Network. Unsurprisingly, the emerging Anabaptist church-planting initiative has strong relational and strategic connections with Urban Expression.

But this initiative, now called *Incarnate*, is the first time the Anabaptist Mennonite Network has engaged directly in church planting. Before exploring the reasons for this strategic shift, it is worth recalling that church planting was a persistent and highly controversial practice of the sixteenth-century Anabaptists.

## A Church-Planting Movement

One of the practices that differentiated sixteenth-century Anabaptists from the Protestant Reformers—and which infuriated the Reformers—was church planting. While the Reformers concentrated on reforming existing churches, converting Catholic parishes into Protestant parishes in which the gospel was (according to their convictions) properly preached and the sacraments properly administered, the Anabaptists became convinced that such reform was inadequate and that establishing new churches was crucial. These new churches would be free from state control, entered on the basis of believers' baptism, communities in which there was a commitment to discipleship and openness to church discipline. They would be multi-voiced congregations that were not dominated by priests or pastors, communities that shared their resources freely and renounced all forms of violence.

There were a couple of abortive early attempts to convert parish churches into Anabaptist congregations, under the leadership of Balthasar Hubmaier—first in Waldshut and then in Nicolsburg. But these did not survive for long. A very different approach in the North German city of Münster briefly resulted in a distorted form of Anabaptism being imposed on the entire population. The capture of the city and slaughter of many of its inhabitants not only dismantled this initiative but confirmed to the authorities across Europe that Anabaptism was as dangerous as they suspected, resulting in increased levels of persecution.

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<sup>4</sup> See Urban Expression: Mission in the Margins website at [www.urbanexpression.org.uk](http://www.urbanexpression.org.uk).

Unsurprisingly, almost all Anabaptists denounced Münster as an appalling aberration and abandoned any ambition of converting state churches or whole communities to Anabaptism.<sup>5</sup> Instead, they planted hundreds of new churches in Switzerland, Austria, Germany, the Netherlands, and elsewhere.

Most of these churches were relatively small, and persistent opposition meant that they met mostly in secret and only occasionally had freedom and opportunity to meet more openly or in larger numbers. They were not uniform, and correspondence between the churches reveals different practices and convictions. Relationships between them varied from great warmth to sharp disagreement and mutual excommunication. Some were charismatic, stirred by visions, and enjoying exuberant worship. Some were more sober, devoted to Bible study, prayer, and ethical reflection. Anabaptists who fled to Moravia to escape persecution formed communities that shared a common purse (perhaps initially as a counsel of necessity on the journey there but then as a practice they believed was biblically mandated) and supported missionaries who traveled all over Europe planting new churches. However, despite these differences, there were many shared convictions and practices in these congregations that distinguished them from the state churches and justified the authorities' conclusion that this was a fairly coherent—and very troubling—movement.

Church planting in the sixteenth century was costly. The expectation of suffering ran through the movement and was presented in the writings of their leaders as a sign that they were the true church (just as the persecuting practices of the Catholics and Protestants indicated that they were not). Those who planted and led these churches were especially vulnerable—subject to arrest, imprisonment, loss of property, torture, and execution. But the missionary zeal of the first-generation Anabaptists—and their conviction that restitution rather than reformation was needed if the church was to recapture authentic New Testament ecclesiology—ensured that this practice would be at the heart of the movement for many years.

In common with many other renewal movements, the passion of the first generation gradually gave way to efforts to consolidate the movement. The missionary zeal abated (although there were exceptions), and their attention increasingly focused on pastoral care, doctrinal and ecclesial conformity, and survival in a hostile environment. The apostolic, prophetic, and evangelistic leadership of the early years was succeeded by the ministry of bishops, pastors, and teachers. Flight to escape persecution, underground existence to avoid notice, and formal agreements with the authorities to refrain from evangelizing

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<sup>5</sup> The history of Anabaptism in Poland-Lithuania, however, demonstrates the possibility of Anabaptism influencing an entire nation through its impact on the rulers. See Michael I. Bochenski, "Polish Anabaptism in the 16th Century: A Story Little Told," *Baptist Quarterly* 42, no. 3 (2007): 218–33.

in return for toleration all sapped the strength of the movement and precluded much further church planting in the regions in which Anabaptism first emerged.

As Anabaptist communities moved further east when their places of refuge became unsafe, and eventually to North and South America to find somewhere to practice their faith without fear of persecution, churches were planted to serve these migrant communities. Few of these, however, were missional in intent or effective in reaching out to others. Only in more recent decades has the practice of church planting become more intentional and more missional—initially elsewhere in the world and then in North America and Europe as it became clear that church planting and evangelism were necessary in these regions as the realities of post-Christendom became apparent.

Anabaptist mission agencies have not always engaged in church planting, often choosing to focus on other aspects of mission and wary of cultural imposition. As noted above, this was the stance of Mennonite mission workers in Britain. But church planting has increased in recent decades, with the consequence that the Anabaptist community is now global and increasingly strongly represented in nations with little or no historic Anabaptist presence.

## Planting Anabaptist Churches in Britain

Efforts to plant Anabaptist churches in Britain, then, can claim to be building on the legacy of five centuries of Anabaptist church planting. But there are also contextual, missional, and ecclesial reasons for the strategic change from the policy of the past seventy years.

Although there are many dimensions of the culture shift that Western societies are experiencing, Anabaptists have tended to focus on the demise of Christendom and marginalization of the Christian community and the story it tells. Post-Christendom is a challenging experience and has been disconcerting for denominations with theological and structural roots in the fading Christendom era.

For Anabaptists, however, heirs of a tradition that rejected Christendom as false and corrupting, post-Christendom also represents relief and opportunity. One of the projects of the Anabaptist Mennonite Network since 2004 has been commissioning and disseminating books in the “After Christendom” series, exploring various aspects of this shift and creative ways of engaging with it. Seventeen books have already been published, exploring a wide range of ecclesial, missional, hermeneutical, and ethical issues, and more are being written.<sup>6</sup> We are convinced that the Anabaptist tradition has some helpful contributions to make as we journey with many others into post-Christendom. Planting churches

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<sup>6</sup> See “The ‘After Christendom’ Series,” Anabaptist Mennonite Network, accessed October 13, 2023, <https://amnetwork.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/After-Christendom-series-An-Introduction.pdf>.

that embody this tradition will provide us with opportunities to test out this conviction and make such contributions.

One of the hallmarks of post-Christendom is decline in the size and number of churches. In some neighborhoods, there are no longer any active congregations. In areas of new housing, there are often no churches present. Some denominations are maintaining a notional presence in many communities at the cost of exhausting their ministers, who are now responsible for multiple congregations. Many congregations are lumbered with unsuitable buildings that are beyond their means to manage, heat, or repair. The Christian community in Britain is an ex-majority minority struggling with logistical, financial, structural, and psychological issues.<sup>7</sup> Church planting offers opportunities to reach neighborhoods without churches; to explore simpler, creative, and more sustainable ways of being church; and to reflect theologically on the challenges of incarnating the gospel in a changing and complex society. We hope that our experiments in Anabaptist church planting might offer some fresh insights and enable us to participate creatively in conversations about post-Christendom missiology.

During the 1990s, church-planting strategies were endorsed by most major denominations in Britain. In those days, church planting was perceived primarily as an evangelistic enterprise and a means of enlarging the Christian community by establishing more churches. The 1990s had also been designated as a “Decade of Evangelism” leading up to the start of the new millennium. The ambition of achieving significant progress by the year 2000 prompted a precipitate rush to plant churches and the setting of wildly unrealistic goals. While hundreds of new churches were planted in that decade, many lacked effective leadership and failed to thrive or even survive, and most replicated the theology, culture, missiology, and ecclesiology of existing churches. Furthermore, many were planted in more affluent areas where there were already numerous churches and required huge investment of people and finances. Urban Expression was launched toward the end of the decade in protest, prioritizing patient engagement with marginalized neighborhoods and advocating more creative expressions of church.

One of the very encouraging features of what was otherwise a disappointing decade was the ecumenical spirit evident among church planters and between denominations engaging in church planting. Although there were still instances of the competitiveness and arrogance that had characterized church planting in previous decades, this time there was much greater cooperation, mutual respect, and encouragement. Church planting, it seemed, contrary to the fears of Mennonite mission workers, need not hinder ecumenical relationships.

Toward the end of the decade and into the new millennium, another encouraging development emerged as the practice of simply replicating familiar models of church gave way to greater creativity and contextual sensitivity. Phrases such

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<sup>7</sup> See further, Stuart Murray, *A Vast Minority* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2015).

as “new ways of being church,” “emerging church,” and “fresh expressions of church” indicated this different approach, and the past twenty-five years have witnessed many experiments and passionate discussions about the interface between missiology and ecclesiology. Anabaptists have been involved in these conversations, and some Anabaptist values and practices have been evident in this season of church planting.<sup>8</sup>

The *Incarnate* initiative is a further expression of this engagement. In addition to contextual and missional incentives for church planting, which we share with many other traditions in our post-Christendom culture, an ecclesial imperative has become increasingly significant for us. Anabaptism is an ecclesial tradition, and community and a shared journey of discipleship are central components in this tradition.

But over the past few decades, Anabaptists in Britain have mostly connected with each other via a dispersed network of individuals:<sup>9</sup> there are some study groups in certain areas, occasional conferences, and a theology forum.<sup>10</sup> Over the past forty years many deep and lasting friendships have been formed. But, as noted above, there are very few Anabaptist churches or communities in Britain. When we are asked for directions to “the nearest Anabaptist church,” the best we can usually do is point enquirers toward churches that are open to Anabaptist perspectives. We believe the time is right—and maybe overdue—to plant some churches that are explicitly and unapologetically Anabaptist.

## Convictions and Practices

At the heart of the Anabaptist Mennonite Network are seven “core convictions” that emerged from conversations in the 1990s and have occasionally been revised. The Network is not a membership organization, so nobody has to sign on to these convictions, but they represent our attempt to contextualize the Anabaptist vision in our culture and function as the center of gravity of the Network. These convictions are explored in *The Naked Anabaptist*, which was written to introduce the Anabaptist tradition to Christians in Britain.<sup>11</sup> To our surprise, this book proved very popular among North American Mennonites and was

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<sup>8</sup> See Stuart Murray, *Changing Mission: Learning from the Newer Churches* (London: CTBI, 2006). This book was commissioned to offer into the ecumenical conversation a distinctively Anabaptist approach.

<sup>9</sup> This is true of Anabaptists in Scandinavia, South Africa, Australia, and New Zealand, in which there are also dispersed networks.

<sup>10</sup> See Anabaptist Mennonite Network website at <https://amnetwork.uk/theology-forum/>.

<sup>11</sup> Stuart Murray, *The Naked Anabaptist: Bare Essentials of a Radical Faith* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 2010). The core convictions can also be found at <https://amnetwork.uk/convictions/>.

translated into several languages (French, German, Spanish, Swedish, Korean, Japanese, and Indonesian). It seemed that our attempt to strip away cultural accretions and uncover the essential elements of the Anabaptist vision resonated with people in many different contexts.

However, the title of the book was, of course, a misnomer. There is no such thing as a naked Anabaptist, any more than there are naked Catholics, Evangelicals, Methodists, Pentecostals, or others. Our theological and ecclesial convictions are always developed within cultural contexts, even if we aspire to be countercultural. But the book was an invitation to identify core elements of the Anabaptist vision and to explain how these were being contextualized in Britain early in the twenty-first century.

In recent years, we have pursued this further by attempting to move beyond convictions to practices, reflecting on how our convictions might be embodied and worked out. As we have discussed this together, it has become clear to us that the “common practices” (we prefer the term “common” as being indicative rather than prescriptive) that we have identified are for communities and not just for individuals. The *Incarnate* church-planting initiative offers us opportunities to test out these practices, refine them, and maybe identify others.

We are also exploring these practices in a new book, due to be published in January 2024, which is both a sequel to *The Naked Anabaptist* and an introduction to emerging communities and projects in Britain and Ireland that are inspired by the Anabaptist vision. *The New Anabaptists: Practices for Emerging Communities* introduces twelve practices that we think are likely to characterize Anabaptist initiatives and churches.<sup>12</sup> It includes chapters written by three of my colleagues, who share the stories of projects they have initiated—Peaceful Borders, SoulSpace Belfast, and Incarnate—and testify to the influence of their Anabaptist convictions on the practices these projects have adopted.

Peaceful Borders was founded by Juliet Kilpin.<sup>13</sup> She explains its remit:

We work to support asylum seekers, refugees, and migrants in the UK to build communities of mutual support and solidarity that help new arrivals forge successful lives in the UK. We do this by initiating refugee-led community hubs alongside bespoke one-to-one support to accompany people as they navigate their new life. We currently work primarily with asylum seekers and refugees who are in long-term hotel and hostel accommodation, who struggle to access adequate information and assistance to do the things that will help them build a new life in the UK. We look for what God is doing on the margins and seek to join in.

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<sup>12</sup> Stuart Murray, *The New Anabaptists: Practices for Emerging Communities* (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald, forthcoming in 2024), which I have co-authored with three colleagues.

<sup>13</sup> “Peaceful Borders: Seeking Peace in the Spaces in Between,” Anabaptist Mennonite Network, accessed October 13, 2023, <https://amnetwork.uk/peaceful-borders/>.

SoulSpace Belfast was founded by Karen Sethuraman.<sup>14</sup> She writes:

SoulSpace is a peace and reconciliation hub seeking to exemplify good community by looking after each other, our neighborhood, our communities, and beyond. We value people more than programs, and so we are less concerned about maintaining institutional religion. Our aim is to champion peace and reconciliation and to play our part in helping to build a Nation of Neighbors.

The third chapter, written by Alexandra Elish, tells the story of the *Incarnate* initiative to plant explicitly Anabaptist churches in Britain.<sup>15</sup> Alexandra chairs the steering group that oversees this initiative and is also one of the coordinators of Urban Expression. She and our two “catalyst-coaches,” Lynsey Heselgrave and Barney Barron, receive some financial support from the Anabaptist Mennonite Network and are accountable to its trustees. Lynsey and Barney are encouraging people in different parts of the country to attempt to plant new Anabaptist churches and are coaching and supporting those who respond. Online and in-person gatherings offer opportunities for those involved to learn together and encourage one another in these pioneering initiatives. SoulSpace Belfast is one of these initiatives, as is another SoulSpace in Bristol.<sup>16</sup>

## Anabaptist Contributions

The *Incarnate* project is small and very young. We have set no ambitious targets, and we are not expecting rapid progress. In our post-Christendom society, church planting is normally slow (unless the approach is to gather Christians from other churches). Many people have little or no knowledge of Christianity, and one of the legacies of the Christendom era is deep suspicion of the church. Patient, humble, and gentle approaches to sharing our faith will be needed in most neighborhoods. But we hope to make a contribution alongside many others who have greater resources and loftier ambitions.

As well as planting new churches in communities where fresh expressions of the gospel are needed, we hope *Incarnate* can offer some perspectives into continuing conversations about missiology and ecclesiology. We were encouraged by the experimentation and creativity that was evident in the early years of this century (and intrigued by the often unwitting resonances we and others heard with the Anabaptist tradition), but our perception is that much of this has faded

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<sup>14</sup> “SoulSpace Celtic Community,” Anabaptist Mennonite Network, accessed October 13, 2023, <https://amnetwork.uk/soulspace/>.

<sup>15</sup> “Incarnate: Church Planting and Pioneering Initiative,” Anabaptist Mennonite Network, accessed October 13, 2023, <https://amnetwork.uk/incarnate/>.

<sup>16</sup> See “SoulSpace Bristol,” Anabaptism Today website, accessed October 13, 2023, <https://anabaptismtoday.co.uk/index.php/home/article/view/227>.

in recent years. Some of the experiments lasted only a short while. Others that received greater institutional support have persisted but have mostly been domesticated. Those that have been regarded as successful have been copied, franchised, and marketed, discouraging contextual sensitivity and further creativity. Some denominations are embarking on church-planting initiatives that appear to have learned nothing from the past thirty years, setting over-ambitious growth targets and focusing on speed and replication rather than contextual relevance. And, while there has been quite a bit of cultural and stylistic creativity, there has been a disturbing lack of serious theological, missiological, and ecclesiological reflection in much of the church planting in recent years.

Might those who trace their spiritual roots to the Anabaptist church-planting movement of nearly five centuries ago have some contributions to offer on these issues? Might there be resources in this marginalized tradition that church planters from other traditions would find helpful? Might emerging Anabaptist churches model values and practices that others choose to reflect on, learn from, and integrate into their projects and communities?

In the sixteenth century, the Anabaptists reminded the Reformers that reformation was not just about doctrine but also required missional and ecclesial renewal. Today, Anabaptists might encourage church planters in all denominations to remember that church planting is not just about more churches. It is about the renewal of the church and the development of ways of being the church that are biblically rooted and contextually appropriate. Careful reflection on the cultural context within which new churches are being planted and deep engagement with biblical teaching and theology takes time and may result in fewer churches being planted. But those that are planted will have more secure foundations and greater potential for sustainable witness.

By way of illustration, here are a few questions that I, as a British church-planting strategist and coach, suggest the Anabaptist tradition might pose for contemporary church planters:

- What understanding of the nature and purpose of the church undergirds your church-planting strategy and expectations?
- Will you take time to listen to the neighborhood and understand its culture before starting programs and projects? Will you be alert to identify assets as well as needs?
- Through whom will you expect the Holy Spirit to speak? To what extent will the church you plant be multi-voiced and participatory?
- What principles and practices will you build into the new church in relation to leadership, accountability, and church discipline?
- What is the good news in a post-Christendom society?
- What expression of the gospel and what forms of evangelism will be appropriate for encouraging radical discipleship rather than need-orientated congregations?

- What missional and ecclesial principles will undergird your practice of baptism and the Lord’s Supper?
- How large and how quickly can the new church grow without jeopardizing its community life? Is numerical church growth always a sign of health?
- Will the church operate as a “bounded set” or a “centered set”? Who will be welcome?
- In what ways will the new church be “good news to the poor”? How might the challenging but liberating biblical principles of Jubilee and *koinonia* be applied?
- How will you decide where to plant a new church? Why would you not focus on places with the greatest social, economic, and spiritual needs?
- Will your focus be on the church or the kingdom of God? How will you avert a church-centered mentality?
- What are the advantages and disadvantages of owning a church building and of planning toward this?
- How might issues of peace and justice be built into the foundation of the new church rather than being ignored or tacked on at a later stage?
- Can your church-planting initiative encourage your denomination or network of churches to become more authentically missional and recover the neglected ministries of apostles and prophets?
- How will you assess the “success” of your church-planting activities?

So an Anabaptist contribution to the contemporary church-planting movement might be to urge deeper reflection on the nature and ethos of the churches being planted, the context in which this is taking place, and the relationship between ecclesiology, missiology, theology, and ethics. Anabaptist church planters might be encouraged to draw more explicitly on their own roots in order to establish churches that are as radical in contemporary society as the Anabaptist churches were in the sixteenth century. Church planters from other traditions might be invited to consider Anabaptist perspectives on church and mission as they explore new ways of being church in a changing culture.

It will be some years before we can judge whether the *Incarnate* initiative has borne fruit—whether this is measured in terms of the new explicitly Anabaptist churches it has catalyzed and nurtured or in terms of its contributions to the wider church-planting movement. In the meantime, our hope is that the reflections on “common practices” in *The New Anabaptists: Practices for Emerging Communities* will be a resource not only for the *Incarnate* initiative but also for other church planters as well, and an invitation to ongoing conversation as we learn from each other.

But our experience with Urban Expression, now twenty-six years old, is that many church planters and others with pioneering instincts have yearned for a missional approach that is holistic, incarnational, patient, contextual, and creative.

Our core values of relationship, creativity, and humility have resonated with more and more people over the years. Urban Expression is not a “success story” (whatever that means) but a sustained attempt to find ways of incarnating the gospel and, where appropriate, planting churches in neighborhoods that are on the leading edge of post-Christendom. Our hope is that the *Incarnate* initiative will join us on this journey and that together we will keep learning and finding ways of sharing what we are receiving as we welcome opportunities to learn from many others. We all need each other in post-Christendom!