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Can these Bones Live?

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This book was published during the time I was a probationer Presbyter and I was very keen to read it for a number of reasons. Firstly, I already had on my bookshelf a copy of Tom's book **Beyond the Box: Mission Challenges from John's Gospel** which was published in 2005. Secondly, I also had a copy of **Changing Church for a Changing World: Fresh ways of being church in a Methodist context** published in 2007 which contains a contribution from Tom.

I remember reading both at the time they were published. This was, of course, many years before I began to sense a call to ordained ministry. These two along with Martyn Atkins' book **Resourcing Renewal** filled me with hope and left me energised. We can move "beyond the box" and participate in the mission of God within our rapidly shifting contemporary culture. Re-imagining church within a changing cultural context has been around for a good long while.



Singing the Lord's Song has been published a decade or so later. It is sadly abundantly clear that Tom's insightful and prophetic words of 2005 have not been taken anything like seriously enough by the Methodist Church in Britain. Perhaps we ought not to be surprised by this. After all, to quote Mark chapter 6 verse 4, "then Jesus said to them, Prophets are not without honour, except in their home town, and among their own kin, and in their own house". On a good day I am filled with hope and excitement for the future of

Methodism but at other times I can easily become frustrated by persistent issues around power and control and by the almost pathological resistance to radical change which is still so often encountered within many of our churches.

I am an extrovert by personality and I can only manage not being around people for short bursts of time. The truth of it is that I often do precisely what Tom suggests when he writes "we will have a future when presbyters drag themselves away from their computers and get out and talk to people, helping them to pray, discover God

in the world and talk about it” (p.135). I do often shut the computer down and go out to where people are because I simply feel I need to. My diaconal colleagues of course are doing this all the time and thank goodness they are. They have much to teach the rest of us. Too much time spent within the church bubble and I will start to feel as though I’m losing touch with reality and with God. I’m surprised when others don’t appear to feel the same. So, I go and sit in the local coffee shop or I go for a walk round the neighbourhood and pop into the supermarket for a pint of milk or a loaf of bread. And the thing is when I do this I know I’m far more likely to end up in a conversation about God, life and the universe than when I’m sitting through yet another church meeting or switching on the computer to respond to emails. Ordinary people of all ages and social backgrounds are hungry for the Gospel and they want to engage; they really do want to talk about God. What a fabulous opportunity!

I was asked in writing this article to focus on the aspect of the book that concerns “praying and living the Ephesian vision, the future of Methodism” and also on the appendix headed “Dry Bones”. I must confess that I am far more drawn to the Ezekiel passage than I am to Paul’s letter to the Ephesian church. There are parts of Ephesians which I find problematic not least of which is the end of chapter 5. Although the book doesn’t make reference to these verses I find it difficult to ignore them when considering the letter as a whole. Might it not even be that these verses could provide for us part of the reason why the Methodist church in Britain is in steep decline? Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza in her **Wisdom Commentary on Ephesians** draws attention to the fact that “we cannot ignore the language of subordination and control as it is expressed in Ephesians because it does not just belong to a forgotten historical past but rather as language of Scripture, it is performative language that still determines not only Christian but also political identity and praxis today”.

Issues concerning equality, diversity and inclusion within the life of the church receive little mention in **Singing the Lord’s Song** and yet significant progress in these areas would I believe mean that we have finally begun to understand what it means to be a truly spirit filled and Christ centred church. There is no room for complacency just because we’ve been ordaining women for a few more years than the Anglican Church. And what, I wonder, is it really like to be a black female Presbyter in the British Methodist Church today or perhaps to be an ordained Minister in a long term same sex relationship or marriage?

I am deeply grateful to the Methodist church for funding my two years of training at the Queens Foundation in Birmingham. I learnt so much in that time about myself and about God. Most importantly though I learnt to theologially reflect and I can see now that without the ability to do that, as Tom rightly points out, we as a church are in serious trouble.

I was fortunate to receive good quality supervision throughout my time as a probationer. My supervisor in his final report wrote of my ongoing work in one particular church in the circuit, “her task will be to draw attention to the Kingdom of God challenging the ways in which the community (by which was meant both the local community and the church community) might need to change in order to encounter it”. It seems to me that this, in a nutshell, is precisely what Tom does in his book. He does it because he cares deeply about the Methodist Church in Britain and because that’s what prophetic leaders are called to do.

I would recommend reading this thought provoking book (www.tomstuckey.me.uk). I hope in doing so you will be encouraged, as I have been, to think more deeply about the calling of the Church in today’s world. Whether or not you agree with what has been written matters less in my view than the fact that the book provides a great stimulus for further debate, discussion and theological reflection.

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