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Centring the Edge: Churches, Crises and White-Hot Faith: A Review Essay on Duckworth and Jamieson, *In-tensional: A Way Forward for the Church*

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Abstract

This article takes the form of an extended review of the recently published book (*In-tensional: A Way Forward for the Church*, 2024) co-authored by the Most Reverend Justin Duckworth, Archbishop Tikanga Pākehā of the Anglican Church in Aotearoa, New Zealand and Polynesia, and ordained Baptist minister, Alan Jamieson. Engaging directly with the book, the article seeks to reflect critically upon the ecclesiology proffered. The essay argues that not only is the historical and theoretical basis of the 'in-tensional centre-edge' model proposed by the authors questionable, but its employment is potentially problematic for the unity and faithfulness of the Church. While engaging with a specific text and a particular context – the Anglican Church in Aotearoa New Zealand – the analysis also offers a case study that should be of interest to a broader audience. The 'centre-edge' model and an emphasis upon 'growth', 'entrepreneurial leadership' and 'innovation' within the proposed ecclesiology are phenomena observable more widely within the Anglican Communion and other 'mainstream' western Church traditions. These emphases, I contend, are illustrative of both the zeitgeist of late modernity and an absence of a theologically robust ecclesiology.

Keywords: Centre-church; centre-edge/centre-margins; church growth; edge-church; entrepreneurial leadership; in-tensional; New Zealand and Polynesia; the Anglican Church in Aotearoa

In their new book, *In-tensional: A Way Forward for the Church* (Philip Garside Publishing, 2024), Archbishop Tikanga Pākehā of the Anglican Church in Aotearoa, New Zealand and Polynesia (the Most Reverend Justin Duckworth) and ordained Baptist minister (Alan Jamieson) offer their diagnosis on the current state of the western church and, as per the sub-title, their proposal of a 'way forward'. Books co-authored by ordained Baptist ministers and Anglican Archbishops are rare, and

Duckworth and Jamieson have between them sixty years of Christian leadership experience, which means their reflections are worth considering.

Their thesis begins with a lament: 'the western world is in crisis: a crisis of bewilderment, and confusion and a loss of believable movements of hope . . . . And yet, at this opportune moment when the world is seeking answers the church in the west is haemorrhaging people, has lost its compelling voice in our culture and shows little sign of gospel life of Kingdom hope' (9). The good news is that Duckworth and Jamieson believe they have the solution to the mismatch between the current neediness of western culture and the Church's decline. This answer, they propose, is a rediscovery of the 'enduring model' between 'two equally essential components of 'church', that is 'centre-church and edge-church' (121, 13).

For Duckworth and Jamieson, centre-church and edge-church are two aspects of the Church in the world. The centre-church, composed of standard parishes/ congregations, is, they believe, facing serious problems. 'Our congregations are ageing, our numbers are decreasing, and we are missing the deep angst, questions and concerns of our time' (29). Worse, these problems are ultimately the result of a more deep-rooted problem. The authors are emphatic in their damming assessment: 'From our experience we perceive the western church to be significantly out of alignment with God: idolatrous, compromised, flabby and insipid. Our faith has gone cold. We are known more often for our hypocrisy than our wholehearted holiness' (31). Fortunately, God is faithful to the Church. According to Duckworth and Jamieson, it is through a pattern of God working 'through prophetically entrepreneurial leaders who he raised up' (28) and their establishing of radical 'prophetic and apostolic groups on the edge of the church' (33) that God, throughout history, has brought renewal and revival to the Church.

Their argument follows a well-formed pattern for popular Christian books. (1) 'We (the centre-church in the western world) are screwed' (21); (2) salvation is potentially at hand in the emergence of new 'edge communities' led by 'prophetic and apostolic leaders'; (3) accordingly, the centre and edge components of the church need to learn to live 'in-tension' with each other if they are to experience the renewal that flows from 'faith ventures and communities' on the edge back into the centre (33).

The thesis is expounded through nine short chapters. Having offered a precis in chapter 1, chapters 2–5 expound the theoretical basis for their argument. Chapter 2 outlines the process of renewal offered by edge groups. Chapter 3 details what the authors believe are examples from Church history of this 'in-tensional' 'centre-edge' dynamic. Chapter 4 offers a hypothetical account of a young Christian leader, describing the ways her zeal and passion could be lost if she is formed by the centre-church, in contrast to releasing and supporting her engagement at the edge, which, in time, will come to influence the centre-church, 'encourag[ing] . . . deeper faith, a higher spiritual temperature and a gospel that offers hope the world' (66). Chapter 5 offers a reflection upon the respective strengths that centre-church and edge-church bring to the in-tensional relationship and outlines a life cycle of edge communities. Chapters 6–8 describe in more detail this life cycle, as edge communities move from being 'radical' to 'sustainable' to 'influential'. The book concludes in chapter 9 with personal accounts from the authors on what they

deem as the successful operation of this in-tensional centre-edge model within their respective ministries.

The authors state that they 'welcome critiques because they will enhance the conversation begun here' (11). Taking this invitation seriously, in what follows, I want to offer a close and critical reading of their thesis. Questions I will reflect upon: What sort of book is it that they have written? What is the theoretical basis of the centre-edge model they propose? What is the evidence they use to support their argument? To what extent is the centre-edge model they employ, which they see as God's vehicle for the renewal of the Church, both historically and contemporaneously, an actual phenomenon or a fictional construct? What evidence is there of the success of their model? And significantly, are there potential dangers for the Church that arise both from the tone of their writing and also from the model they so keenly advocate?

Section 1 – Initial Impressions: Tone and Assertions

From the start, the reader is struck by two elements of the writing: (1) the strength of assertions made by the authors and their tone and (2) the dichotomous framing through which they view the Church. The book is not a scholarly, nuanced reflection on ecclesiology but rather takes the form of a manifesto. The western church, we are told repeatedly, is 'idolatrous', 'comprised', 'flabby' and 'insipid'.[1] The decline of the Church in the west is due to a loss of passion and depth of faith and to the fact that 'centre-church people' are 'resistant to the new things God is doing' (12). These 'new things' are to be found on the edge. It is these edge communities that offer 'a living example of a highly committed expression of following Jesus and a deep and holistic commitment to the gospel' (67). The edge stands in contrast to the 'wider church, with its widespread compromise and nominalism', and 'the edge's wholehearted commitment and the prophetic imagination and apostolic vigour they bring is essential for church renewal' (67). Indeed, '[w]ithout the "edge" western churches will continue to die' (20).

The emphatic nature of these assertions immediately raises three questions for this reader. First, is this a fair characterization of the Anglican Church in Aotearoa, New Zealand and Polynesia,[2] churches throughout Aotearoa New Zealand and, more broadly, the western Church? And second, is the causal relation between Church decline and lack of faithfulness (in this case, a theological explanation), the only way to explain this phenomenon?

To take the first of these questions. What is this western Church that the authors refer to? The Church is not monolithic, and its visible presence within western societies is characterized by multiplicity and diversity. Can one confidently make the

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[1]These adjectives, 'idolatrous', 'compromised', 'flabby' and 'insipid', are repeated throughout the book (×11, ×13, ×6 and ×6, respectively, excluding other cognate terms) and contrast with the repeated adjectives used to describe the edge-church: 'radical', 'prophetic', 'apostolic', 'whole-of-life commitment' and 'white-hot faith' (a term I will return to later). Here, I suggest that the use of a thesaurus by the authors would have aided readability. The pejorative (and, in the case of the edge-church, laudatory) tone of these repeated phrases signals the authors' ecclesiological positioning and/or preference.

[2]The Anglican Church in the Province of Aotearoa, New Zealand and Polynesia consists of three tikanga but is one Church. Does the Archbishop's characterization concern only tikanga Pākehā or all three tikanga?

assertion that the authors do of the Church in the west, writ large?[3] Positioning myself in my context: I have been involved in a range of churches (Open Brethren, Independent-Pentecostal, Presbyterian, Anglican, rural, suburban, urban), para-church organizations and edge communities in Aotearoa New Zealand during the last five decades, and my general experience is not one of being surrounded by 'insipid', 'idolatrous', 'compromised' believers. I reflect on my life thus far with a tremendous sense of thankfulness for the broad and diverse range of Christians I have worshipped with, lived among, celebrated and grieved with and worked and ministered alongside. Is the Church, as Saint Augustine pointed out centuries ago, 'mixed' (*corpus permixtum*), a body comprising saints and sinners, the wheat and tares mingled together? Yes. One cannot deny the reality that churches are a mixed reality: hospitable and hostile, gracious and grasping; aspiring and angry, compassionate and combative. However, these different characteristics, I posit, are neither confined to individual congregations nor denominational structures but rather, if we are honest, are present within all our hearts – and thus extant within all who comprise the so-called centre and edge components of the Church. There is no 'pure' church, nor, this side of eternity, have any of us completed the process of 'being transformed into Christlikeness' (2 Cor 3:18).

My experience of involvement in multiple expressions of the Body of Christ has not been of being surrounded by people going through the motions, attending church for personal piety, to fulfil social expectations, or as a form of status.[4] When the authors state that 'Many of those staying in the church are not highly committed to a steadfast hope of future revival but people of low commitment or rapidly advancing age' (27), I wonder what churches they are thinking of or attending regularly?[5] The Anglican parish I am part of is certainly strongly tilted towards those over the age of sixty-plus; however, the parishioners are certainly not insipid and/or lacking in commitment.

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[3]The numerical growth of neo-Pentecostal mega-churches provides a counter to the author's contention that the church is 'dying' (though recognizing that this begs the critical question whether life is measured by numbers or depth of faith and faithfulness). See Warner, L. 'Going big: Mega-churches in the Midst of Declining Christianity in the West'. In *The Decline of Established Christianity in the Western World: Interpretations and Responses* (London: Routledge, 2018), pp. 175–85; James Wellman, Katie Corcoran and Kate Stockly, *High on God: How Megachurches Won the Heart of America* (Oxford University Press, 2020). Being from low-Church evangelical backgrounds, the authors of the book may also be unaware of the significant numbers of evangelicals converting to High-Church Anglicanism, Roman Catholicism and Orthodoxy. See Douglas M. Beaumont and Francis Beckwith, *Evangelical Exodus: Evangelical Seminarians and Their Paths to Rome* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2016). The Academic Parish of Prague based at the Roman Catholic St Salvator Church in the highly secularized Czech Republic, led by the Roman Catholic priest-sociologist-theologian Tomáš Halík, is but one example of flourishing 'centre-churches' in the west.

[4]While historically this may have been the case with some Church attendees, I would suggest this is unlikely to be the case in Aotearoa New Zealand today. Only ten-fifteen per cent of New Zealanders regularly attend churches, but the levels of involvement and commitment of this sizeable minority are high. See McDonald, B., Lineham, P., Mai, B., Owen, S., Scott, M., Taylor, L., Galt, M. and Brookes, N., *Insights from the 2023 Church Life Survey New Zealand* (October 2023), https://clsnz.cra.org.nz/image/CLSNZ_Booklet.pdf (accessed 2 September 2024).

[5]The implicit devaluation of the elderly here, and its correlation, the adulation of youth, is a theme I will return to later.

Second, while there is no doubt, statistically, that the Church in Aotearoa New Zealand, and more broadly in western societies, is decreasing in numbers and likewise is ageing, is this, as the authors contend, due to the 'flabby', 'compromised' nature of the Church? Is the Church's decline in numerical strength directly linked to a lack of faithfulness? Are there possibly other factors that might be at play? Here, even a cursory familiarity with a range of thinkers reflecting upon the enormous socio-cultural shifts within western modernity – specifically Charles Taylor's *The Secular Age* – would challenge the simplistic causal theory offered. Arguably, the gradual decline of the Church in the west and Aotearoa New Zealand is as much a result of the monumental shifts that have taken place within western culture over the last two hundred-plus years: the emergence of the modern 'buffered' self, the 'fracturing' of the world of beliefs, the shift from 'transcendence' to an 'immanent frame', the increasingly pluralistic nature of western societies, and how these dynamics have reshaped the place and conception of the Church within society – that is, the end of Christendom and decline of organized religion, and an accompanying emergence of 'individualized' expressions of Christianity.[6]

These significant socio-cultural shifts are then compounded by socio-demographic realities. That the Church in Aotearoa New Zealand is ageing can largely be explained by the fact that, like other western societies, the country has an ageing population. As life expectancy continues to increase and birth rates continue to drop, the median age of the population continues to increase – 38.1 years in 2023.

The lack of nuance, the broad generalizations, caricatures, simplistic binary framing and the disparaging judgemental tone will, I suspect, be a barrier to many readers. The authors are experienced Christian leaders, and I am surprised that they (and the publisher) did not appreciate that the belittling attitude towards what they term 'centre-church' might be problematic. However, looking past these failings, what of the actual 'in-tensional centre-edge' model they propose? The theoretical basis of the proposed model will be our concern in the next section.

Section 2 – Locating the Book: Theory and Context
Catholic Religious Orders
The book has its origins in an unfinished doctoral project commenced before the moment, described by the authors as 'some wacky combination of God's prophetic humour and creativity, coupled with the courage of the Anglican Church' (15), when Justin Duckworth was appointed to the role of bishop of the Wellington

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[6]Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007). Andrew Root's trilogy, which uses Taylor's thesis as the basis for reflecting upon how contemporary 'secular' context shapes understanding and practices of Christian faith formation, pastoring and congregational life, provides such analysis. Andrew Root, *Faith Formation in a Secular Age (Ministry: Responding to the Church's Obsession with Youthfulness* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017); *The Pastor in a Secular Age: Ministry to People Who No Longer Need a God* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019); *The Congregation in a Secular Age: Keeping Sacred Time Against the Speed of Modern Life* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2021). Tomáš Halík is less pessimistic and sees the postmodern post-secular age as a purifying process that offers the opportunity for the 'transformation of the Christian faith'. Tomáš Halík, *The Afternoon of Christianity: The Courage to Change*, trans. Gerald Turner (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2024), p. 41.

Anglican diocese.[7] The centre-edge model developed in the book is essentially a popularized version of a theory explicated in an academic journal article by US religious sociologists Roger Finke and Patricia Wittberg.[8] Finke and Wittberg contend that it is the presence of 'religious orders' within the Catholic Church that 'stimulate organisation growth, develop innovations for adapting the church to a new culture or era, and provide the institutional support for a high tension faith.'[9] It is, they contend, this dynamic of keeping these religious orders 'within the institutional church', which accounts for the 'long-term vitality of the Roman Catholic Church.'[10]

It is important here to note that Finke and Wittberg are not offering a *prescriptive* model but rather a *descriptive* model they think explains how the Roman Catholic Church's organizational structures, in the case of religious orders, 'have provided one of the most effective avenues for ongoing revivalism in the church.'[11] They contrast this organizational structuring to 'retain sect-like movements within its boundaries',[12] to Protestant expressions of Christianity, which either suppress sects or splinter. Duckworth and Jamieson's manoeuvre is to take this hypothesized model on how the Catholic Church has been able to incorporate innovations and utilize them as sources of 'internal reform and revival' and to then posit that this explanatory model for historical phenomenon can be employed as a normative, working model for application to non-Roman Catholic ecclesiological structures (in the case of the authors, Anglican and Baptist settings) within the contemporary western context. Contemporary edge communities are equated with Catholic religious orders and thus become the sources of revival and renewal for the Church and its corollary, the sought-after holy grail: church growth.

Such a manoeuvre raises a host of questions. The authors offer a mythologized vision of Catholic religious orders, but how does this square with the facts that these same religious orders were implicated in the phenomena of the inquisition, growing antisemitism and colonization enterprises?[13] Is it accurate to make an analogy between edge communities very much in their nascency and, I would contend, with

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[7]Subsequently rebranded as *Anglican Movement*, https://anglicanmovement.nz. This rebranding process and the jettisoning of the word 'church' are present in many other contexts. See, for example, Madeleine Davis, 'New churches are dropping the word "church", report finds,' in *Church Times*, 13 August 2024, https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2024/16-august/news/uk/new-churches-are-dropping-the-word-church-report-finds (accessed 30 August 2024).

[8]Roger Finke and Patricia Wittberg, 'Organizational Revival from within: Explaining Revivalism and Reform in the Roman Catholic Church', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 39, no. 2 (2000): 154–70. The other key theoretical text in the background is Ralph D. Winter, 'The Two Structures of God's Redemptive Mission', *Missiology* 2, no. 1 (1974), pp. 121–39.

[9]Finke and Wittberg, p. 154.

[10]Finke and Wittberg, p. 166.

[11]Finke and Wittberg, p. 166.

[12]Finke and Wittberg, p. 154.

[13]The romanticized view of religious orders offered also ignores that while they have undoubtedly been communities of prayer, scholarship and faithfulness during their history, they have also been experienced as communities of confinement, coercion and brutality. One may consider here a single example: the experience of St John of the Cross during his eight-month imprisonment in the Carmelite monastery in Toledo in 1577–78.

only surface similarities to centuries-old religious orders?[14] Can this model, used to describe historical phenomena, really be employed in such a pragmatic fashion in our contemporary Church context? Specifically, can the model be employed in the way the authors propose in non-Catholic ecclesiological contexts? And most significantly, is it plausible to believe that an organizational restructuring, once applied to the Church, will usher in revival?

The Imperative of Growth and the Allure of Organizational Solutions

That two religious sociologists, in a paper published in the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, should conclude that renewal and revival are not merely related to but seemingly contingent upon organizational structures is, in our contemporary age, perhaps unsurprising. Likewise, that Finke and Wittberg's article, punctuated with the terms 'market/marketing', 'growth', 'techniques' and 'innovations'[15] and their conclusion – 'Catholic religious orders, like Protestant sects, can promote organizational growth, appeal to the people with institutional innovations, and develop a distinctive subculture to support a high tension faith' (166) – would appeal to two Christian leaders concerned with the decline in Church numbers, is also foreseeable.

While Duckworth and Jamieson tell us that their book is not a rehash of the 'emergent forms of church variously described as missional, intentional, emergent, fresh expression or alternative church' (9), I am not convinced by this avowal. Their argument has strong similarities to those advanced by these other movements, which have emerged and then faded away during the last three decades within the evangelical stream of the western Church.[16] Common to the proliferation of books, conferences and experts in each of these forms is the same structural argument: the church is out of touch with contemporary societies' needs, concerns and deepest desires, thus increasingly 'irrelevant', but we have the solution. While these other movements have emphasized new (or a rediscovery of old) forms of mission, worship and discipleship, Duckworth and Jamieson incorporate these movements into their meta-solution. What has prevented these various movements from renewing the Church, they contend, is their isolation at the periphery of the Church. What is required, like the Roman Catholic Church, is an incorporation of these dynamic renewal movements into the organizational structure of the Church.

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[14]Even Urban Vision, promoted throughout the book, the previously self-described neo-monastic order, now retitled as 'an *apostolic order* of Te Hāhi Mihinare, the Anglican Church of Aotearoa, New Zealand, and Polynesia', is just over two decades old.

[15]And 'market openings' (160), 'organizational growth by marketing their faith'(160), 'developing new techniques for marketing the faith' (166).

[16]In the UK context, there has been a strong emphasis on 'new things' and 'innovation' in the two decades since the release of *Mission-Shaped Church: Church Planting and Fresh Expressions of Church in a Changing Context* (London: Church House Publishing, 2004). This report and the emphasis on a 'mixed economy' (now termed 'mixed ecology') have faced significant theological critique. See Andrew Davison and Alison Milbank, *For the Parish: A Critique of Fresh Expressions* (London: SCM Press, 2010). For a more recent report, noting the lack of 'theological rationale behind the starting of new things', see *New Things: A theological investigation into the work of starting new churches across 11 dioceses in the Church of England.* https://ccx.org.uk/3d-flip-book/new-things/ (accessed 22 September 2024).

Thus, in their meta-solution, renewal of the Church comes not from deeper engagement with Scripture and the theological tradition, a deepening of the Church's collective prayer life and participation in practices that develop inner lives of intimacy with Christ, nor from obedience to Christ in all the micro-decisions of life. Rather, renewal is contingent upon structural reformation. Church decline can be arrested and even turned around with an organizational restructure and specifically, by not getting in the way of 'prophetic, apostolic leaders'.[17] That, in our modern capitalistic age, we are both enamoured with 'growth' and, as Alasdair MacIntyre suggests, smitten by the archetypal figure of the bureaucratic manager might help explain both the attractiveness of this theory to our authors and others within the Church. Church renewal, apparently, flows not from a shared desire for deeper intimacy with Christ and spiritual and moral transformation that results from the agency of the Spirit within the Body of Christ but instead is a case of undertaking a successful restructuring and the implementation of new techniques.[18]

I suspect that Duckworth and Jamieson appreciate that renewal and revival do not flow from structural change but from changes within human hearts brought about by the power of the Holy Spirit – and that, at best, structural realities can be a help or a hindrance to this reality. The problems are (1) this is never explicitly stated, which means it is easy to understand that the thesis being offered is: 'if we get our structures correct, renewal and revival will automatically follow.' And (2), as we will see later, the structuring they propose – two components of the Church essentially operating in their own bifurcated spaces – is deeply problematic for the unity of the Church and thus for its overall health and well-being.

Section 3 – Centre-Edge as Universal Enduring Model for Renewal?: A Historical Assessment

Later, I will turn my attention to deeper concerns I have regarding the appropriateness of the centre-edge model, specifically to what I see as a potentially corrosive form of relationality inherent within the model. However, first, it is necessary to reflect upon how Duckworth and Jamieson utilize the centre-edge model as a lens for reading church history. Central to our authors' argument is that the centre-edge model is a universal model that has existed throughout Church history and is the means by which God brings renewal and revival.[19] But is this an

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[17]Archbishop Justin self-identifies himself as 'an apostolic leader', while Alan is 'the stereotypical teacher-pastor leader' (32).

[18]On how our modern age is habituated to the illusion of 'managerial effectiveness' and the belief that successful management techniques can control social outcomes, see Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013), pp. 102–04. For a reflection that locates the 'neo-monastic movement' – another 'renewal' movement that seems to have come and gone – within this broader socio-cultural milieu, fascinated with growth, techniques and controlled outcomes, see Andrew Shepherd, 'Living Faithfully in a Neoliberal Age?: From Market Rationality to Neo-Monasticism', in *Kingdom Come: Reflections in Honor of Jonathan R. Wilson*, ed. Jason Byassee, Jeremy Kidwell and Jonathan and Leah Wilson-Hartgrove (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2022), pp. 44–52.

[19]For instance: 'We are convinced that by allowing the prophetic and apostolic edge-dwellers to function more healthily alongside the life of our churches, we will see renewal'. 'It's the pattern of church history. It's the way God has *always* brought renewal to his people' (34, 35; my emphasis).

accurate assessment? Is it edge communities that God uses to bring revival and renewal to the centre and that are at the forefront of understanding cultural and transformative societal movements? Have edge communities always been the agents of renewal for the Church? Is there counter-evidence to suggest that while God may sometimes bring renewal and revival from the so-called edge, God, being God, utilizes many other means?

In chapter 3, the authors use the centre-edge framing for a revisionist reading of Church history. Anthony and the Desert Fathers, Augustine, Benedict and the early western monastic tradition and then Francis and Dominic in the thirteenth century become examples of prophetic-apostolic edge-dwellers whose movements simultaneously bring life and healing to the margins of societies and plant the seeds of renewal for the compromised centre-church. Here, the lack of depth and engagement with scholarship becomes strikingly evident. The account of Church history offered by the authors is strewn with historical errors and factual inaccuracies. Following an oft-repeated Constantinian-Fall narrative pervasive in a stream of populist Christian books, we are erroneously told that Christianity was a 'persecuted, small and struggling' group on the margins of society until 'Constantine became a Christian and made Christianity the religion of the Empire' (41).[20] The upshot of this move from 'being outcasts to having influence at the very centre of the society' was that 'compromises and comforts became part of the Christian lifestyle' (41).[21] Saint Anthony is viewed as the first archetype of an edge leader, rejecting the 'newfound popularity' of Christianity and leaving his possessions and 'joining a group of desert-dwelling hermit Christians.' Anthony and others, we are informed, eschewed their 'social capital', 'good education', 'social standing' and 'wealth', rejecting 'career, power, family and social ties', and being 'dissatisfied' with the Church established a 'break-away movement' (42).[22]

The history of the Augustinian and Benedictine orders becomes similarly distorted to fit the author's centre-edge paradigm. The authors emphasize the 'alternative lifestyle' (45), the services monasteries offered to broader society and their lay leadership. What is not mentioned is that at the heart of Benedictine religious orders was (and still is) the recital of daily offices (i.e. participation in eight services of worship each day). These monastic movements were not, as contended, 'a small breakaway movement of lay people' (46) seeking to transform society or the Church. Their primary motivation was the desire to live lives of worship and to

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[20]Constantine did not make Christianity the religion of the Roman Empire – he merely removed it from a blacklist of outlawed religions. It was the Edict of Thessalonica in 380, issued by Emperor Theodosius I nearly six decades later, which affirmed Nicene Christianity as orthodox and made it as the state religion of the Roman Empire. For a response to the Constantinian-Fall thesis, see Peter J. Leithart, *Defending Constantine: The Twilight of an Empire and the Dawn of Christendom* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2010).

[21]Any reading of Athanasius, Gregory of Nazianzus and other Church Fathers, persecuted and exiled for their refutation of the form of Arian Christianity promoted within the Roman Empire throughout the fourth century, would disabuse the authors of these false notions.

[22]Again, this is full of errors. Anthony spent the vast majority of his life as an eremite/hermit, and his motivation for heading to the desert was neither due to the 'deep pain or angst' regarding the 'lifestyle' of the church or broader society, nor was it to establish a 'breakaway movement' (42). Anthony's motivation, as with all the early Desert monastics, was to wholeheartedly seek Jesus Christ! H. Ellershaw, *Life of Antony, Select Writings of Athanasius*, Library of Nicene and post Nicene Fathers II.4 (New York 1924, repr. 1957), pp. 195–221.

deepen intimacy with Christ. Care of land, care of the poor, education and hospitality flowed from this primary and fundamental orientation. Nor were these movements, as stated, always lay-led. Priests often were present in monastic orders, serving as abbots of monasteries and being instrumental in key missionary movements to Ireland, Scotland and northern England (e.g. Columba, Cuthbert).

Likewise, the rendering of the emergence of the Franciscans and Dominicans in the thirteenth century again is more fictional re-creation than historical fact. The emphasis, once again, is on 'a radical alternative [lifestyle] to both church and society' (47). Francis' vow of poverty, we are told, 'was a clear critique of the indulgent lifestyles of many in the church' (48). That, at this time, all who lived in Christendom Europe – with the exceptions of Jews – were understood as Christians and thus part of the Church, makes clear the extent to which this statement is contrived. Francis and the others, highlighted in this revisionist, fictionalized history, were not archetypal 'pioneering, entrepreneurial, prophetic-apostolic' leaders of 'breakaway movements' with hubristic illusions of renewing an idolatrous church and bringing revival to society. They were humble men and women seeking to live faithful lives of worship – their worship expressed through a range of modes, including daily worship and prayer, scholarship, care of land, hospitality and care for the sick and poor.[23]

If the claim that the proposed centre-edge model is a continuation of historical and extant religious orders owes more to fictional – and romanticized – imagination than historical fact, then what are we to make of the claim that it is edge communities that God primarily uses to bring renewal of the Church and revival? Is it largely edge communities that embody the radical nature of the gospel and who are willing to count the costs of Christian discipleship? What about the innumerable counter-examples of renewal and revival that have been initiated and led by what the authors would define as centre-church – that is, the structure or sites of organizational/institutional power and authority, or your standard neighbourhood or city congregational church? Here, one immediately thinks of several examples: the Gregorian reform of the eleventh century; the tremendous renewal that spread through the Roman Catholic Church as a result of decisions made by Vatican II;[24]

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[23]Alarming here is the flattening out of the depth and diversity of monasticism and religious orders throughout western Church history: the differences between early monasticism in North Africa, post-Benedictine monasticism in Europe, the emergence of mendicant orders in the mediaeval period and contemporary monasticism. Evident too is the failure to appreciate the differing charisms of respective religious orders: contemplative prayer (Benedictine, Cistercian, Carthusian, Trappist, Carmelite), mission and education (Jesuits), scholarship (Dominicans) and social ministry and mercy (Franciscans). For introductions to this depth, differences and diversity, see Bernard McGinn, John Meyendorff and Jean Leclercq, eds., *Christian Spirituality: Origins to the Twelfth Century.*, vol. 16, World Spirituality (New York: Crossroad, 1997), chapters 5 & 9; Jean Leclercq, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God: A Study of Monastic Culture*, 2nd rev. ed. (New York: Fordham University Press, 1974); C. H. Lawrence, *Medieval Monasticism: Forms of Religious Life in Western Europe in the Middle Ages* (London: Longman, 1989).

[24]On how tradition is integral to the renewal that stemmed from Vatican II, see Matthew L Lamb and Matthew Levering, eds., *Vatican II: Renewal within Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). On the critical contribution of the *ressourcement* movement in the first half of the twentieth century – a movement led by theologians that sought a return to biblical, patristic and liturgical sources as the means for renewal of the Church – in preparing the ground for the reforms of Vatican II, see Gabriel Flynn, 'Theological Renewal in the First Half of the Twentieth Century', in *The Cambridge Companion to Vatican II*, ed. Richard R. Gaillardetz (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), pp. 19–40.

the critical role of the Catholic Church in supporting the overthrow of the Marcos dictatorship in the Philippines in 1986;[25] and St. Nicholas Church, situated in the centre of East German city Leipzig, that, as a place of prayer and conversation, was the heartbeat of what became known as the Candle Revolution – the peaceful protest that brought an end to Communist rule in East Germany in 1989.[26] Or further back, one recalls biblical accounts of the renewal of faith led by figures not at the edge but very much at the centre. For example, Josiah's reform of the worship of Judah is recounted in 2 Kings 22–23 and 2 Chronicles 34–35. More contemporaneously, one might consider the charismatic movement that swept through what would be defined as centre-churches of a range of denominations in Aotearoa New Zealand and other western societies from the late 1960s to the early 1980s.[27] Again, this renewal movement originated not at the edge and was not contingent upon organizational structures but rather simply stemmed as a gracious gift (*xáris*) – a fresh pouring out of the Spirit and empowering of the Body of Christ in the western world.

Here, it is worth asking the extent to which the authors' passionate advocating of the centre-edge model blinds them to other realities. At issue here is the deeper question regarding the nature of how we construct and utilize models. British psychiatrist and polymath Iain McGilchrist's observations are apposite here.

> Models are simply extended metaphors. The choice of model is crucial here because the problem for seekers after truth is that that choice governs what we find . . . . Since a model always highlights those aspects of what it is modelling that fit the model, any model soon begins to seem like an uncannily good fit, which means we espouse it with greater confidence . . . as they say, to a man with a hammer, everything begins to look like a nail.[28]

My suggestion is that such is the case with the centre-edge model proposed by the authors. The author's interpretation of both historical and contemporary realities is more a case of flawed eisegesis than exegesis.

[25]Niall O'Brien, *Revolution from the Heart* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987). Robert L. Youngblood, *Marcos Against the Church: Economic Development and Political Repression in the Philippines* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2019).

[26]Jörg Swoboda, *The Revolution of the Candles: Christians in the Revolution of the German Democratic Republic*, ed. Richard V. Pierard, trans. Edwin P. Arnold (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1996).

[27]One of striking aspects of the charismatic movement in the west was its impact across Christian traditions – Roman Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox. See John G. Maiden, *Age of the Spirit: Charismatic Renewal, the Anglo-World, and Global Christianity, 1945–1980* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023). In the United Kingdom, what our authors would regard as centre-church leaders – parish vicars/congregational ministers, principals of theological colleges – were, much to their own surprise, renewed by the charismatic movement. For an attempt to reflect theologically upon this, see Tom Smail, Andrew Walker and Nigel Wright, *Charismatic Renewal: The Search for a Theology* (London: SPCK, 1995). For the origins and impact of the charismatic movement within churches in Aotearoa New Zealand, see Brett Knowles, *Transforming Pentecostalism: The Changing Face of New Zealand Pentecostalism, 1920–2010* (Lexington, KY: Emeth Press, 2014).

[28]Iain, McGilchrist, *The Matter with Things: Our Brains, Our Delusion, and the Unmaking of the World* (vol. 1), pp. 409–410.

Section 4 – The Adequacy and Appropriateness of the Model for Ecclesiology

Thus far, I have outlined three aspects of the book I believe are worth critical interrogation. The simplistic argument put forward by the authors – that the church is 'screwed' but we have the answer – rests upon (1) an unsupported assertion of the idolatrous nature of the contemporary centre-church and a valorizing of edge communities, (2) a belief that a heuristic developed to explain revivalism and reform within Roman Catholic historical ecclesiology can be applied as a working model to contemporary Protestant ecclesiological realities and (3) a dubious and instrumentalised re-reading of key figures and moments within western Church history. However, fundamentally, my deepest concerns regarding the author's advocation of their in-tensional centre-edge model are the potentially significant deleterious impacts on (a) the nature of relationality and therefore the unity of the Church and (b) on the Church's faithfulness to the gospel. In the section below, my reflection will be guided by three questions I seek to answer: *What is the nature or form of relationality that the centre-edge model envisages and reifies? What aspects of the ecclesia does the employment of this model emphasize and esteem and what aspects of the Church are therefore overlooked or diminished? What are the potential consequences both for the individual believer and the Church as a whole from the form of relationality and discipleship that the model promotes?* To respond to such questions, it is helpful first to consider other contexts in which similar centre-edge models/metaphors have been applied.

The centre-edge/centre-margins model borrowed by Duckworth and Jamieson from religious sociologists is a construct that has been utilized in a broad range of fields – from psychoanalysis to human–computer interaction, and most well-known, as a framework deployed within the social sciences and humanities, in particular in cultural and post-colonial studies, development and feminist theory.[29] Integral to these centre-edge/margin/peripheries models is an analysis of the role of power within structures and systems – whether these be economic, socio-cultural or political. Put simply, the model predicates that centres have control of resources and exercise authority and power due to a structural inequality that deprives the margins of these resources and excludes them from accessing power. These inequalities may exist due to historical realities or are intentionally established, but they result in some having unearned privileges at the expense of others. Broadly speaking, within the theory, it is conceived that for justice to be done and for authentic flourishing for all to be achieved, those on the edges/margins/peripheries need to reclaim what is rightfully theirs. Such a rebalancing requires a range of processes: pedagogical conscientization and the development of critical consciousness by those on the margins[30] and a reordering of the organizational structures to overturn the power and resource asymmetries that exist.

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[29]Perhaps the best known use of the term is by US black feminist scholar and social activist, bell hooks. The construct, understood as 'centre-peripheries', has also been widely employed within international development and international relations theory. See the influential article by Johan Galtung, 'A Structural Theory of Imperialism,' *Journal of Peace Research* 8, no. 2 (1971), pp. 81–117.

[30]Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970).

Over recent decades, the use of the centre-margins/centre-edge paradigm has also found its way into Christian theological and missiological discourse, most prominently in the multidisciplinary field of World Christianity.[31] In the emerging post-colonial paradigm, mission is no longer conceived of as from the western Church to the world but has been either reconceived as from the margins back to the centre (reverse mission)[32] or, further, as a mission from 'everywhere to everywhere'. The use of the model, prioritizing the agency and prophetic and revitalizing life and faith of the margins, has been particularly apparent in the World Council of Churches (WCC). At the WCC 10th Assembly in 2013, the WCC adopted the document *Together Towards Life: Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes* (TTL). The document identified and affirmed 'Mission from the Margins' as one of the four ways the Holy Spirit is at work within the mission of the Triune God, stating that 'marginalized people are agents of mission and exercise a prophetic role which emphasizes that fullness for life is for all. The marginalized in society are the main partners in God's mission'.[33]

While in the field of missiology, there are some strengths to this framing, I am less convinced that the application of the model directly to ecclesiology is altogether helpful. Below, I will briefly explicate a few concerns.

Centre-Edge: Separation and a Relationality of Endless Struggle

A fixed spatial bifurcation is a defining aspect of our author's proposed centre-edge model. In the proposed centre-edge dichotomy, the Church is categorized into two distinct components, almost silo-like, with little in common, operating within their spheres. Indeed, the delineation is made normative when the authors state: 'Each needs its own *space* and role as they collaborate' (72). A few pages later, they state explicitly: 'The centre's role is not to lead and shape the new gospel initiatives, but to support and authenticate the emerging leaders and movement. This means putting our mana (respect and backing) behind them. We may have questions and concerns, but our [that is leaders of the centre-church] role is to guard these leaders and create *space* for them to develop their new initiatives' (85, my italics).

But does the Church, as the authors assert, really consist of two delineated components, with different characteristics and with radically distinct ways of being in the world? If one is to employ the fixed-binary essentialism of the centre-edge

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[31] World Christianity, embracing the disciplines of anthropology, communication studies, critical theory, history, post-colonial studies, sociology and theology, seeks to explore both how Christianity has become a global phenomenon and the nature and shape of this phenomenon. In contrast to Eurocentric approaches, which have tended to view non-western forms of Christianity as aberrations of the norm, World Christianity seeks to give equal attention to 'under-represented and *marginalized* communities of faith . . . attention being paid to Asian, African, and Latin American experiences; the experience of *marginalized* communities within the North Atlantic world; and the experiences of women throughout the world'. Dale T. Irvin, 'World Christianity: An Introduction', *Journal of World Christianity* 1, no. 1 (2008): pp. 1–26 (1–2) (my emphasis).

[32] For example, Michael Krause, Narry F. Santos and Robert Cousins, eds., *From the Margins to the Centre: The Diaspora Effect: A Collection of Essays to Celebrate the 20th Anniversary of the Tyndale Intercultural Ministry Centre* (Toronto: Tyndale Academic Press, 2018).

[33] Commission on World Mission and Evangelism (CWME), *Together Towards Life: Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes*, (WCC: 2013), https://oikoumene.org/sites/default/files/Document/Together_towards_Life.pdf, par. 107.

model, how does one account for centre-churches involved in 'radical' ministries – both historically and in contemporary contexts? Does the fact that many centre-churches understand culture and are engaged effectively in mission within their local communities make these, in fact, edge ministries? And if this is the case, does this suggest that the terms 'centre' and 'edge' are ultimately arbitrary – that we have, as McGilchrist's quote earlier suggested, a fictional construct imposed upon reality, a case of 'words creating worlds'?[34]

The simplistic binary nature of the model – characterizing the centre-church as primarily *being the problem* and edge communities as offering *the solution* – reifies and makes normative a relationality characterized by *tension* and struggle. Rather than noting the fluidity between these different aspects of the Church, we are told repeatedly of the difficulty that centre and edge ministries will have in engaging with each other.[35]

The centre-church we are told 'has much to offer . . . and enormous strengths' (72); however, the paucity of words the authors offer to expound on these offerings and strengths speaks volumes. In contrast to the edge that is valorized throughout, in two short paragraphs, the authors outline the strengths of the centre-church: its' visibil[ity] to the wider community and recognition for community work, access to faith-based schooling, aged-care facilities and social housing, provision of weddings and funerals, youth events, buildings available for community-use, credibility, inherited tradition and institutional strength (72–73).[36] Here, the centre's detailed strengths consist merely of access to resources. There is no mention of the richness of theological, liturgical or musical traditions that have sustained and nourished the faith and worship of Christians over centuries. Nor is there any indication that those

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[34]To such questions, the authors may respond that they are not using the construct 'centre-edge' about geographical/structural realities but rather regarding the spirituality/ways of being of these different components of the Church. If this is the case, why would one utilize a structuralist organizational model in the first place?!

[35]'Centre-church and edge-dwellers often don't hear each other well. The lived realities and key voices that shape their world views are fundamentally different . . . ' (96). Really? One would hope that as fellow-Christians, the key voice they would be seeking to hear, together, through listening to scripture, tradition, reason and experience, would be that of Christ.

[36]Here, there appears a glaring contradiction. Throughout the book, we are told how out of touch the centre-church is to cultural realities. Yet, now, we are informed that this same centre-church is also recognized, seen as credible and trusted to host and participate in the most critical moments of human life – birth, education, marriage, ageing, death! The fact that the Church within Aotearoa New Zealand, even while diminishing in size and social status, is still largely viewed favourably is borne out in recent research. See the *Faith and Belief Survey* commissioned and published by the Wilberforce Foundation in November 2023. https://faithandbeliefstudynz.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/wilberforce-comprehensive-report-2023-1.pdf, esp. pp. 53–55 (accessed 2 September 2024). This incongruence continues when the authors categorically state that despite the 'credibility, inherited tradition and institutional strength' the centre-church possesses, it would be inappropriate of the centre-church to leave the space defined for it and offer any of its torturously gained wisdom to those on the edge. The 'initial season' of an edge ministry, we are informed, 'is not the time for central-church engagement, nor for deep theological reflection, or developing best practice' (75). Considering the recent damning findings of the Royal Commission of Inquiry into Abuse in Care in New Zealand, generally, and particularly regarding Church institutions, this cavalier attitude towards concerns over best practice is particularly worrisome. Failure to implement best practice or have a clear sense of one's foundational theological commitments from the start only leads to major problems in the future. See https://www.abuseincare.org.nz/. The fallout created by failings of so-called edge-ministries inevitably gets cleaned up by the centre-church.

older in the faith journey – the aged referred to in disparaging terms elsewhere – might have any wisdom to offer to the young radicals on the edge. Indeed, the two short paragraphs outlining 'the enormous strengths' the centre-church has to offer end with more than a hint of a mercenary posture: 'Centre-churches can also have enormous resources in property, accessing to money and infrastructure. For edge communities, there are immediate opportunities in having connections with an established church' (73).

The vision of the Church offered within the book thus follows a similar pattern as in other discourses where the centre-edge model has been employed. The Church is viewed as composed of strictly structured divisions with an asymmetrical relationality characterized by tension and struggle between believers. But doesn't viewing fellow Christians – and indeed the world itself – through the lenses of tension, struggle, crisis and loss, become a case of a self-fulfilling prophecy? If those on the edge living 'white-hot faith' are told that other Christians are living 'flabby', 'idolatrous', 'insipid' and 'compromised' lives, then should it not surprise us if the feelings of pride that the authors warn against begin to arise?[37]

Yet, is this, in truth, the nature and *telos* of relationality within the Body of Christ that we are invited into and that we want to endorse? Should experienced Christian leaders promote the concept of relationships within the Body of Christ as typified by tension? There is no denying that human relationships – including within the Body of Christ – are fragile and fraught and often characterized by conflict.[38] However, isn't the Kingdom of God meant to be characterized by relationships of 'righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit' (Rom 14:17)? Tension may have a vital role for stringed instruments but is deeply problematic for the long-term health of human relationships.[39] Here, it is worth noting the instructions of St Paul to the Church of Philippi on how their relationality should follow that of Christ: 'Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others' (Phil 2:3–4).

Normative Discipleship and the Diminishment of Vocation

In addition to the divided and tense relationality that the book extols, there are other disturbing aspects of the argument. Integral to the book is a prioritization and valuing of novelty, innovation and youthfulness.[40] Furthermore, there is a repeated assertion that 'the Church must be re-aligned to cultural needs' (27, 74). The good news of Jesus Christ is always contextual. Forms of worship are always shaped by the language and contexts that we inhabit, and the gospel is only good news when incarnated and transformative in the lives of individuals and communities. However, to suggest that the primary authority in the life of the Church is that of the needs of the surrounding culture sets it on the path towards that which the authors

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[37]Duckworth and Jamieson note that 'pride is prevailing and challenging attitude that cannot be left unchecked' (81).

[38]For example, the tension that exists between Paul and Barnabas in Acts 15:36–41.

[39]My thanks to an anonymous reviewer for this striking metaphor.

[40]For a helpful engagement with the contemporary western Church's problematic obsession with youthfulness, see Root, *Faith Formation in a Secular Age: Responding to the Church's Obsession with Youthfulness* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017).

elsewhere rightly renounce, idolatry! In light of this strong emphasis on contextual awareness (and deference to contextual realities) and either silence or devaluing of Scripture and tradition, and with the clear demarcation and isolation of the two spheres of centre and edge proposed by the authors, I am left wondering: what the guardrails are to ensure that edge communities and their pioneering entrepreneurial leaders continue to hold to the tradition that they have been passed on?[41] This is a particularly important question when implicit within the book is the disparagement of theological education. Indeed, careful discernment, appropriate on-the-job supervision and external theological training of a young leader are labelled as 'indoctrination and domestication' (57).

Furthermore, the binary model proposed seems to assume a single normative expression of Christian discipleship. Edge-dwellers are commended for their willingness to 'sacrifice modern western capitalist idols of career, possessions, higher education and owning a home' (68). In addition to noting the anti-intellectual and negative view of human vocation that underlies this statement, it's worth pondering the lives of those in the western Church who are doctors and nurses involved in healing and caring ministries, those involved in education, business owners employing others and generating wealth, gardeners and farmers producing food, those collecting and sorting recycling and waste, those designing and building the houses we live in and the infrastructure we depend upon, those working in our public transport systems, policy analysts seeking to write good policy to ensure better environmental outcomes or the better provision of housing, those stacking our supermarket shelves, research scientists seeking greater understanding of our world, lawyers and judges seeking to administer justice, etc. The first divine command for humanity is to flourish within creation and to exercise benevolent care for all aspects of it – human and non-human (Gen 1:28; 2:15). Doesn't fulfilment of this human vocation require education – the passing on of knowledge and traditional practices, the building and inhabiting of homes, the procreation and care of families, creative work? Are Christians involved in these pursuits of learning, working and house-making, doing what all of humanity, pre-capitalism and today, has done, seeking to live lives of meaning (and, in the case of Christians, for the glory of God, the love of our neighbour and the flourishing of creation), all thus worshipping idols?

Ultimately, the use of a spatial structural model consisting of two polarities (centre and edge) as a way of conceiving of the Church leads to a range of problems: relationships viewed as consisting of endless struggle and tension, the promotion of certain expressions of Christian vocation and the belittlement of others and the elevation of youth and innovation over aged wisdom and tradition. In contrast, the metaphors of the Church employed within the New Testament – for example, a grapevine, a body, a building – emphasize not tension but interdependency. In contrast

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[41]Repeatedly in the Scriptures, the Church is instructed to value the teachings and traditions of elders, of those who have gone before. The Apostle Paul explicitly states that there is nothing innovative to his ministry that he simply passes on what he has received (1 Cor 15:1–11, esp. v 1–3). Aristotle's comments on the relationship between practical wisdom and experience here are also apposite: "Young people can become mathematicians and geometers and wise in things of that sort; but they do not appear to become people of practical wisdom. The reason is that practical wisdom is of the particular, which becomes graspable through experience, but a young person is not experienced. For a quantity of time is required for experience." (*Nicomachean Ethics*, Book VI, Chapter 8).

to the centre-edge structural metaphor, integral to these organic metaphors is the primacy of Christ ('I am the vine, you are the branches', 'the head of the body', the 'cornerstone'), the life-giving presence of the Spirit and intergenerational human relationships, characterized not by tension and pride but by humility and mutual honouring.

Conclusion: Centre-Edge Inversion and the Future of the Church?

And what of the future? What does the model endorsed by the authors mean, practically, for the Church, moving forward? Here, there is significantly more that could be said, but I will limit myself to a puzzlement that arises and then an observation. Firstly, some puzzling questions that emerge if churches – both local congregations and larger denominational structures – were to embrace the in-tensional centre-edge solution proposed: What happens when the pioneering, entrepreneurial, prophetic-apostolic leaders from the edge assume leadership roles in the centre? Does this then conflate the required 'in-tension' that exists between the two poles of centre and edge that is a necessary aspect of the dynamic for renewal? Or is it that the pioneering apostolic leader now sets about restructuring the organization of the church, inverting the two polarities, in which case the hitherto edge communities now become the new centre and the former centre-church becomes the edge? If this, hypothetically, were to take place, then what would become of the 'credibility', 'inherited tradition' and institutional strength' and significantly the resources/buildings that these centre-churches have accrued over decades, in the case of Aotearoa New Zealand over a century, and in other western contexts, over many centuries? If such an inversion were to take place, does being relocated to the edge now make such Christians marginalized edge-dwellers, and if so, will the 'inherited tradition' and institutional strength' and the accrued 'credibility' and wisdom that are fruits of being grounded in one context for long periods now be able to be passed onto the recent edge-dwellers who now occupy the centre? Will the clearly defined and demarcated spaces for these two components of the church continue to exist, or will the former centre, which is now the edge, simply die out, thus requiring the emergence of a new edge to start the cycle of renewal again by pushing back against the centre?

White Hot or Ahi Kā?

Finally, a brief observation on one of the key metaphors employed by the authors to describe the faith of the renewal-revival carrying communities on the edge: 'white hot'. 'White hot' for Duckworth and Jamieson is seen as a positive, something that other Christians should be aspiring towards, an intensity of faith that has the potential to ignite the faith of others who come into close contact.

However, it is worth noting that 'white-hot' burns are not always a good thing. To use an analogy from my experience: wood fires within mountain huts loaded with fuel and burning 'white hot' are not a pleasant experience. Those present within the building soon feel claustrophobic and overwhelmed by the intensity of the heat, while the fire itself can become a danger to those in proximity. In a worst-case scenario, the fire endangers the building itself. Indeed, when an object is burning 'white hot', other

objects standing too close can spontaneously (i.e. with no volition) combust and begin to burn. When such items are precious *taonga* (treasures), the loss can be distressing. When such proximate objects are people, the consequences can be devastating. White-hot fires burn fast and furiously, and unless the all-consuming conflagration spreads (thus, as noted above, risking damage to precious *taonga* and/or people), they quickly burn themselves out. What is left? Nothing. The intensity of the burn vaporizes objects in their entirety – the only evidence of the fire is the residual scorch marks.

Unfortunately, the dynamics I have described are often witnessed within so-called edge communities. While not denying the positives of energy, passion and enthusiasm, over my lifetime, I have witnessed (and experienced) the significant shortcomings of 'white-hot' faith. I know of a good number of people historically involved in such 'white-hot' communities, or in close contact, who bear the scars from being badly burnt. Others, once the intense blaze dies out, realize that their faith – built upon the dogma that their discipleship of passionate activism and energy is key to renewing the Church and/or ushering in the Kingdom – no longer exists. With limited fuel added to sustain a slow-burning, duration-of-life burn, they discover that their faith is now extinguished. To put this bluntly: White-hot faith communities may appear enticing and attractive, but they also, like all unrestrained and unsupervised fires, can be extremely dangerous. It is worth remembering that within Christian history, there is no shortage of passionate 'white-hot' communities, led by charismatic, self-proclaimed messianic-prophet-like figures, with less than auspicious endings (e.g. Thomas Müntzer, 1525; the Münster rebellion, 1534–5; more recently, Jonestown 1978, Waco, 1993; and the less apocalyptic but devastating reality of an innovative community led by an entrepreneurial Anglican priest, The Nine O'Clock Service, based at St Thomas' Church in Crookes, Sheffield from 1986 to 1995).[42]

In contrast to the metaphor of 'white-hot' intensity, I suggest another metaphor that might be more fitting – that of the principle of *Ahi kā* from *Te Ao Māori* (the world of Māori).[43] Over generations, one way Māori established *mana whenua* (power and authority over a territory) was through keeping alight (*kā*) cooking fires (*ahi*) within a territory (*rohe*). Cooking fires do not burn with 'white-hot' intensity. Anyone who has cooked on an open fire knows that one loads sufficient fuel to create a bed of hot embers to cook upon. Once cooking is finished, further fuel may be added to build the fire to create warmth and ambience for the gathered community. However, again, the intensity of the fire is carefully managed – too hot and people are in danger of being burnt or driven away from the encircling assemblage. Insufficient heat and people are liable to move away from the fire, retreating to more hospitable contexts – tents, huts, homes. Such fires fluctuate in their temperature: stoked daily, small amounts of fuel added to reach cooking temperature, dying down and then, after eating, roaring back to life for a brief period. Such a metaphor, of unspectacular small fires, burning for long periods in the same location, providing the focal point for a community to be nourished physically and in spirit, is, I contend, a vivid imagery of the life cycle of local

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[42]Roland Howard, *The Rise and Fall of the Nine O'Clock Service: A Cult within the Church?* (London: Mowbray, 1996). See note 36 regarding my concerns on the seemingly laissez-faire disposition towards practices that would guard against the 'burning' of people.

[43]Māori are the indigenous peoples of Aotearoa.

congregations, parish churches – that is, centre-churches – committed, over long periods of time, to a geographical location.

In-tensional ends with a final chapter in which the authors point to how the model has been outworked in their respective contexts. Jamieson recounts how the centre-edge dynamic of the South West Baptist Church in Christchurch was significant in the days following the horrific mass shootings at two mosques in Christchurch in March 2019. Archbishop Duckworth speaks more generally about how edge communities have brought life and renewal to the Wellington diocese and of Bishop Eleanor Sanderson sharing this story at the Lambeth Conference in 2022.[44] And yet, in a pattern common in other contexts where 'new things' are the current craze, the reality is that a good number of the missional communities Bishop Sanderson referred to that day no longer exist. There may indeed be evidence of a deeper spiritual life and temperature within the Wellington Anglican diocese because of the influence of edge communities, but after a decade of this model being implemented, there is no evidence that this has translated into an overall growth in numbers across the diocese.[45] Whatever the in-tensional centre-edge model may offer the Church, it is not a silver bullet for numerical church growth.

The growth of the Church, as it always has been, depends not on human structures, the presence of apostolic-prophetic leaders or the implementation of innovative techniques but rather is fundamentally contingent upon the grace of God. Perhaps the task of the Church in Aotearoa New Zealand and other western societies at this moment in time is not to anxiously search for the latest solution but rather to humbly and courageously face the potentiality of our dwindling and death. Acknowledging that seeds must fall to the ground to produce a new harvest (John 12:24), we nonetheless hold onto the eschatological hope that God is a God of resurrection and that we are incorporated into Christ's Church, birthed, sustained and empowered by the Spirit of Christ. And so, as our fires burn less brightly and the numbers gathered around the fires diminish, we pray:

Fire of Love we wait on you
to kindle our hearts, kindle our hearts
Fire of Love we wait on you
to kindle our hearts we pray
Holy Spirit fan the flame[46]

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[44]Mark Michael, 'Discipleship Call Aims to Awaken Nominal Anglicans', *The Living Church*, 22 August 2022, https://livingchurch.org/news/news-anglican-communion/discipleship-call-aims-to-awaken-nominal-anglicans/ (accessed 30 August 2024).

[45]Recent figures obtained from New Zealand church historian, Peter Lineham, indicate that the rate of decline – numerically – within the Wellington diocese, matches that of the Christchurch and Auckland dioceses.

[46]Tom Wuest, 'Fire of Love' from the album, *Unless the Seed Falls*, 2006. [https://tomwuest.bandcamp.com/track/fire-of-love]