

for Christian faith and practice echoes other more weighty works, and there are points where this reviewer would take issue with the theological position that lies behind Smith's proposals. But it is readable and engaging, and for busy ministers who cannot afford the luxury of wading through dense theological and philosophical tomes, it provides a most helpful and constructive insight into that elusive phenomenon known as postmodernism, and how it might be taken to church.

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*Back From the Brink: Stories of Churches Which Refused To Die*, Heather & Pat Wraight, London: Christian Research, 2006, ISBN 9781853211751. £9.95

What a good book for me to read! You see I am not a fan of the technical "how to grow your church" books. Rather do I prefer to hear stories which speak of real churches doing real work; stories that allow me to put flesh on bones, so to speak. And so I enjoyed ten stories of ten churches, all of which had gone through very difficult times but which are now experiencing signs of new life.

The churches whose stories are told here are a very mixed bunch. The collection consists of rural, village, inner-city and estate churches, and represent different theologies and styles of churchmanship. And yet in all that I read, common problems were experienced and common factors shared as these problems were overcome. Indeed it got to the stage that after reading of five or six churches I knew what was to come in the remainder! But this only points us to the facts concerning the difficulty the Church has found itself in in the post-war period, and the on-going decline that has been the experience of the vast majority of churches. And if it be recognised that these ten churches tell the stories of a great number of churches, then perhaps what they have discovered to be the means of injecting new life should be paid attention to.

What impressed me from the outset was that even in the darkest days there were those people within these churches who would not let them die. This very committed core (numbering a handful at times) kept alive what many would have considered to be not worth the effort. It was encouraging to read of the dedication of the few who could still 'see' the potential of their church. And as the committed few kept alive a sense of hope, certain other factors eventually came into play that turned their situations around.

What was most evident in these new factors was the importance of leadership. It's often said that studies have shown that if you take away the 'professional leadership' from churches, the life of the church will dwindle. Time and again the crucial contribution of leadership is noted in the stories of the ten churches. In most of the churches it is when they get leaders with vision, who could see beyond the immediate situation, that things begin to happen. Other factors which contribute very positively are: building relevant relationships with their communities; being open to change; being willing to take risks; and involving people. There does appear to be a strong desire within these churches to in some sense "build a community through which all can experience the love of God" (p. 156), with the emphasis being on through and not in. Church becomes a broader concept than traditionally thought of; it is more about people and their needs and such a church gives to some people a sense of belonging which helps them to believe.

Ministerial/professional leadership did provide a great deal of impetus to the development of the churches. But that leadership was not only visionary it was also very personable. The leaders were people persons, able to get alongside and enthuse and encourage others. As a Minister I found this aspect of the stories reaffirming my own story, my own thoughts on ministry itself. But there was so much more to lay hold of in this book. Creativity and imagination abound in that a good deal of thinking 'outside the box' is evident. The willingness to review church structures, to ask pertinent questions about what it meant to be church where they were, the outward focus and the underlining of the necessity of team work all shone through. Much of what I

read rang true for me, and seeing growth being experienced across the spectrum of church life only served to persuade me that there was much valuable food for thought within these pages. Obviously growth is to be seen more clearly in some churches than in others, but there is no doubt that all of them have and are experiencing new life. From a faith perspective one detects “God at work” signs in all the ten churches. Surely all that has been achieved is related greatly to the faithful prayers and committed lives of those who would not give up, and who God graciously responded to. Such a work does the eye of faith detect.

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