

Book Review by John Littleton, January 2023.

Scott Cowdell, *Church Matters: Essays and Addresses on Ecclesial Belonging* (Bayswater, Victoria, Australia 3153: Coventry Press, 2022).

238 pages, Paperback \$34.95, Preface and 15 Chapters: occasional pieces taken from the period 1996-2021. Foreword by Hugh Mackay. www.coventrypress.com.au

Church Matters is a treasure trove of rich resource and wise insight gifted to us by Scott Cowdell, an Australian Anglican Professional Theologian, a former Principal of St Barnabas' Anglican Theological College, Adelaide, 1998-2002.

All disciples and ministers of the Christian Church will find food for thought in this impressive publication: everyday disciples, parish and diocesan leader disciples, deacon disciples, priest disciples, and bishop disciples; all the baptised; including 'every stripe of Anglicanism', Evangelical, Anglo-Catholic, Broad Church, and Fresh Expressions (Pages 153-158); those interested in the important vocation and role of the professional theologian in The Anglican Church of Australia (191, 227); and those who have left or are thinking about leaving the church (61-74).

Church Matters is easy to read, accessible, wide ranging in the topics, short chapters revealing depth of thought and reflections well resourced; with a colourful, people-centred cover.

Cowdell's expressed concern as a Catholic Anglican 'is to keep the Church and the Eucharist at the heart of Christian life and imagination'. He emphasises a 'whole people of God ecclesiology', 'lay vocation', 'the ordained ministry', and affirms 'that God is bigger than the Church and that God is anything but absent from the secular' (13-14). His work fulfills the role of theology which is to serve the People of God in their theologising, by providing quality examples and skilful guidance; showing a love of the church as it is and seeking to influence its reform (231). The book is an invitation to 'join in the venture' (238).

The author of *Church Matters* has a firm foundation upon which his perspective on many topics is built, where 'belonging to the faith community that gathers week by week around the two tables of word and sacrament is of the essence' (13). Cowdell wants to 're-establish the early Christian expectation that Eucharistic gatherings constitute and define the Church' (160-166), restore 'key elements of the early undivided Church, including reverence for the Eucharist' and recover 'a whole people of God and body of Christ view of the Church' (171-173).

The Essays and Addresses derive from a variety of contexts. In *Church Matters* the author affirms, challenges, nurtures, and invites the thinking disciple into the conversation on a wide range of topics: The Postmodern Church, The Mission-Shaped Church, An Abusive Church Culture, Civil Baptism, Church and Society, Religious Consumerism and Individualism, Secular Culture and the Church, Parish Life, Lay Vocation, Mimesis and Ministry, and the Doing of Theology, for example.

To be more specific, in Chapter 5 on 'Baptismal Ecclesiology and its Enemies' Cowdell emphasises that 'every baptised Christian has a vocational calling within the Church's wider mission of knowing, worshipping and serving the God of Jesus Christ' (95). He writes about the connection between Baptism and the Eucharist, stating 'Indeed, baptismal ecclesiology can equally be seen as a Eucharistic ecclesiology, announcing and enabling God's call to all the baptised who are sent out from the liturgy week by week 'to love and serve the Lord'' (96).

In Chapter 2 on 'Lay Vocation and Worship' he writes 'It is the vocation of lay people to preside at 'extensive liturgy' (out in the world) – following Christ in living out their Christian calling in the world – while the priest's building up of the Church entails presiding at its 'intensive liturgy' (in Church)' (48).

Cowdell refers to the Biblical Theology Movement (37, 188) and highlights evidence from the New Testament faith communities as a guide for his reflections (47, 82, 160-167, 184, 212, 231).

The topic of ecumenism surfaces during these well-crafted *Essays and Addresses*. The undivided nature of the earliest churches is mentioned often (161, 167, 171, 184, 209). 'Acceptable canonical diversity emerges in the New Testament period' (231). References from other church traditions are used. High praise is given in Chapter 10 to the Church of the Apostles, Seattle, USA, 'which is an eleven-year old joint Episcopalian-Lutheran congregation' where the Episcopal Church and the Evangelical Lutheran Church 'are in full communion, which allows mutual recognition of ministries, joint ordinations, Eucharistic hospitality, etc' (174-177).

Many thought-provoking quotes are available. For example, 'This engagement will not just mean a mind and heart open to God's truth in the world, but also a commitment to the betterment of the world because it is the world God loves' (31). 'My faith is simply that God is continuing to make the Church, and that staying on board with the actual Christian community can be a joyful, hopeful position (69-70). 'Our Church has a future because Jesus Christ and his gospel have a future' (177). 'What we do want is to inhabit secular modern culture in a distinctive way, having freely chosen to live as Christians and to be the Church *in* this world though not *of* it (226).

Church Matters is a must purchase for serious readers of theology, and an essential addition to Parish, Public, Theological College and University Libraries. Thank you, Scott, for enhancing the critical and dialogical role of a professional theologian and theology within the Anglican Church of Australia and beyond, through these significant and valued *Essays and Addresses on Ecclesial Belonging*.

The Reverend Canon Professor Scott Cowdell is Adjunct Research Professor in Theology, Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture, Canberra, and Canon Theologian, Anglican Diocese of Canberra and Goulburn. He is the author of ten books, including *God's Next Big Thing: Discovering the Future Church* (Melbourne: John Garratt Publishing, 2004).

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