REVIEWS

KEVIN WARD, *AGAINST THE ODDS: MURRAY ROBERTSON AND THE SPREYDON BAPTIST CHURCH.* AUCKLAND: ARCHER PRESS, 2016. [ISBN 978-0-473-36725-1]

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This is a remarkable, multi-layered book. Ostensibly it primarily appears to tell the story of forty years of ministry of Murray Robertson at the Spreydon Baptist Church. That is how it largely proceeds for the first two-thirds of the book. However, there is much more reflection once that story is told.

The story begins with Murray Robertson, a young Presbyterian-trained pastor, beginning in 1968 his first and only full-time ministry, now as a Baptist, in Spreydon, a struggling and ageing church in Christchurch. Whether the situation at that time was as dire as it was later remembered, may be debated. Ward indicates that closure was an option (11). However, there were still 67 members, with a youth group of 30, and 50 in the Sunday School. So there was some sort of base for the future, fragile though that may have been.

This is not to take away from the remarkable growth, change and dynamism identified in the book over the next forty years—to Murray Robertson's retirement from the senior pastor role in 2008. Ward provides a snapshot of numerical data relating to the Spreydon church in 2005: 1550 attending Sunday services each week, 20 community ministries, one of which, the Addington community, employed around 273 personnel, and 2945 people attending Spreydon outreaching ministries during the week (141). In addition, numerous Spreydon folk had gone on into the pastorate or other ministries, 72 of them into overseas missionary service (218).

What happened between 1968 and 2008? Largely it was a time of numerical and ministry growth, the exceptions perhaps being 1984–1991 (the "seven years of famine" [80]), and a plateau in Murray Robertson's final few years as senior pastor (200). Numbers alone don't tell the full story. There was not an ascending, dead-straight road, but rather a road with multiple twists and turns, and even the occasional backtrack.

Those shifts make up a lot of the Spreydon/Robertson narrative. One of the first adjustments for the Spreydon congregation was the embracing of charismatic renewal from the early 1970s, accompanied by exodus from the church and influx from other churches (27–31).

House churches, led by "house church pastors" became a key component of Spreydon life from the mid-1970s. These were distinct from the "home group" development of that era, being a key component of church life rather than an adjunct—thus for a time membership of a house church was a prerequisite of membership in the church as a whole (34). The house church focus was strongly applied and relational, and sought to provide most of the church's pastoral care. However, in 1981 significant mutation occurred. The term "house church" was dropped, their "pastors" became "leaders", the size of the groups was reduced to

more cell-size, and specialist groups began for particular types of people and ministries (44). Six years later, the demise of the earlier house church vision seemed complete, with a substantial closing of most groups in favour of the new "flavour-of-the-decade" area congregations (63, 82–83).

Area congregations began partly as a pragmatic solution to practical issues of church growth, but they were also fostered by a number of "prophecies" in the Spreydon church. However, these new congregations absorbed a huge amount of congregational energy without significant growth ensuing (Spreydon's "barren years" [79]), and they weakened the central congregation. So they in turn largely finished up on the scrap-heap (shut down and reabsorbed into the main congregation) in the early 1990s (89).

This raises the question: how could Robertson be so dogmatic that this or that new development was the answer, and yet discard that answer a few years later? The question is particularly acute with the area congregations, which seem to have been viewed later as wrong from the start (though the book does not explicitly say this). And what of the "prophecies" that heralded their beginning?

Area congregations gave way to community ministries—an extraordinary number and range: divorce care, outreach to poets and artists, Alpha evangelism, English language courses run by Marj Robertson (111), and 24/7 relational programmes in high schools (145–46). This flourishing of community ministry continued throughout the remaining period of Murray Robertson's ministry. Murray Robertson saw radical change in church life as necessary every seven years or so (172). These radical shifts led him to feel later that he had really been the pastor of three or four churches—albeit the one Spreydon church (173). Another radical new initiative may have been due in the early 2000s. Instead it was time for a new leader. So the narrative of the book concludes with Murray Robertson's retirement as senior pastor in 2008.

Despite all the changes, a number of constants appear in the narrative—expository preaching, the kingdom of God, mission focus, holistic ministry, and visionary team-enhancing leadership. Preaching is particularly given emphasis as a key to the Spreydon developments, including the reproduction of two of Murray Robertson's key sermons (55–60, 160–64).

Recurring Spreydon themes were emphasised, particularly the Nazareth manifesto in Luke 4, with its focus on the gospel (and social justice) for the poor and marginalised. Major focus was also given to a three-fold ministry of teaching ("word"), social justice ("deed") and charismatic manifestation ("sign") (cf Acts 11:38).

The voice of the author provides an interesting layer within the Spreydon/Robertson story. Ward, now senior lecturer at the (Presbyterian) Knox Centre for Ministry and Leadership, attended Spreydon for several years prior to going (later) into pastoral ministry. Later again he re-attended Spreydon (also serving part-time on staff). From such a background there is not only an "outsider" unfolding of the Spreydon story, but also intermittent, insider comment on that story. A whole page is given over to Ward's comment (100–101), for example. Such comments may be viewed as interruptions, but they also provide enrichment and insight to the narrative.

Had Ward's book closed with the end of the narrative in 2008 the book might well have been described as good (a history of a church and its pastor), but not great. The great part comes in the final third of the book, particularly an extensive interview of Murray Robertson on church mission and leadership in

chapter seven, and Ward's own reflections in chapter eight. Both chapters brim with ideas for church leaders. These include maintaining a tension between expositional preaching and addressing contemporary issues (177), preserving theological orthodoxy alongside cultural change (191), taking risks (176, 210), and leading a relational team rather than operating as a CEO (179).

Towards the end of the interview chapter Murray Robertson expresses concern about three aspects of the current church scene: consumer Christianity, the relative lack of Maori in church, and a pervading blandness in much of church life (185). He views the present church situation rather bleakly: "basically the situation now is what it was back in the 60s which was a bleak decade for the church" (187). Is there hope? Globally yes, particularly the significant embracing of the gospel in the non-western world, and the flourishing of ethnic ministry and congregations in New Zealand (187).

The book as a whole raises for me two large issues. One is whether much that took place at Spreydon was simply social science, management stuff and pragmatism. Given the magnitude of the question, I would have liked more than the brief answer given by Ward (210). The second issue concerns Murray Robertson's emphatically articulating vision ("this is the solution to our present situation or malaise"), yet discarding it later. Was God leading, or was it simply seat-of-the-pants intuition or pragmatism (172)? Did change arise out of restless boredom (173)? Such questions are not directly addressed within the book; yet material there is suggestive of an answer. Both Robertson and Ward stress the importance of a "theology of journey" as opposed to a "theology of place". The former theology focuses on process and quest; the latter on arrival and stability. Two generations ago Alvin Toffler noted rapidity of change, leading even to throw-away friendships. Did Murray Robertson sense early on that there was a need for "throw-away church", not in the sense of discarding the church (which has always been very central to him), but discarding "sacred cows" within the church that hindered the required mission of the church, and the advance of the holistic gospel? If so, then much of the sharp shifts, even the backtracks, make sense in terms of the search for the "better country" (Hebrews 11:16 [198]).

I could quibble about typos and awkwardness of language in parts of the book. These, however, are minor matters. For those wanting to know what happened at Spreydon and why, for those wanting to reflect on the church located in an increasingly "foreign land", for those seeking deeper insight into the mission of the church in New Zealand today, this is a very fine book.

MATTHEW CLARKE AND ANNA HALAFOFF. *RELIGION AND DEVELOPMENT IN THE ASIA-PACIFIC: SACRED PLACES AND DEVELOPMENT SPACES*. LONDON: ROUTLEDGE, 2017. 137PP. [ISBN: 978-1-138-79236-4].

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