

**Helen Cameron**

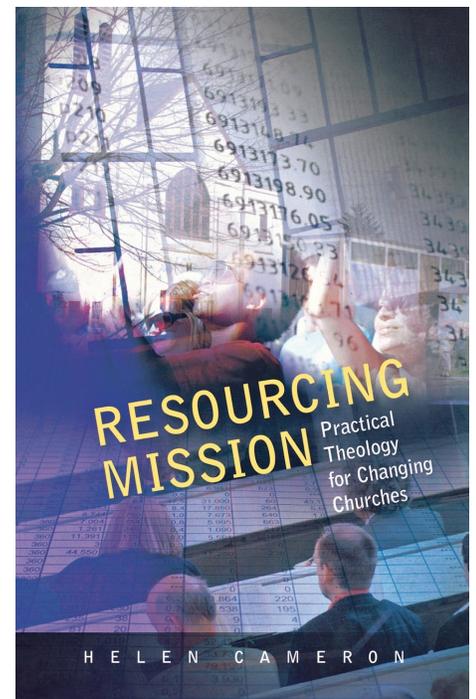
***Resourcing Mission: Practical Theology for Changing Churches***

**London: SCM Press, 2010**

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**Reviewed by Darren Cronshaw**

An ideal way of learning the art of studying ecclesiology and ethnography is seeing the approach of other practitioners. I appreciate practical theology case study books not just for what my students and I can learn from the issues under analysis, but also what we can learn about the process and methodology of theological reflection and ethnographic investigation.



Helen Cameron is an experienced practical theologian who, when she wrote this book, had been an active church researcher for 18 years. She was the first full-time Director of the Oxford Centre for Ecclesiology and Practical Theology (OxCEPT), and for a decade taught an MA in Consultancy for Ministry and Mission.

In *Resourcing Mission*, Cameron argues that to understand change in local churches we need to analyse it theologically (using the pastoral cycle) and consider the cultural forms (of five different types of congregations). She outlines these two assumptions in the first two chapters, and then discusses seven illustrative case studies.

In the first chapter, Cameron suggests that arguing about what a church 'ought' to be doing is not as helpful or liberating as investigating what churches do in practice and how and why they are doing that. She outlines the usefulness of practical theology and 'the pastoral cycle' that moves from experience (what is happening), to exploration (why), to reflection (drawing on Scripture and tradition), and ultimately to planning action. Cameron has written *Resourcing Mission* to enable local churches to 'do theology' methodically with the pastoral cycle, in order to clarify how to participate in God's mission. This is a good foundational approach for any church or issue.

The second chapter examines congregational studies and the assumption that churches exist in different cultural and organisational forms. Cameron proposes that most churches exist in one of five cultural forms that convey different messages about the nature and organization of church:

- A 'parish church' takes the form of a public utility that locals pay for and use as needed.
- A 'gathered congregation' is like a voluntary association; people who join up expect to contribute.

- A 'small-group church' is like book groups or party plans
- A 'third-place church' is modeled on secular third places that are open and hospitable gathering places
- A 'magnet church' with its specialist programs for different generations functions like quality schools that parents choose for their children.

People relate to different churches according to the organizational forms they reflect. This is a helpful explanatory model to enhance understanding of local churches and their different dynamics.

Chapters 3-9 then apply the pastoral cycle to case studies of time, money, buildings, risk and regulation, decision-making, leadership and partnership. Each chapter describes the experience of the situation, explores the socio-cultural context of the issue, engages in dialogue with tradition (usually a Scripture passage and a doctrinal theme), and plans appropriate response, including differences for the five different types of church forms. Each chapter offers insights on its selected topic, but the biggest value is in illustrating the pastoral cycle tool of practical theology, and the schema of the five church forms.

For example, chapter 9 examines practices of partnership. It outlines the experience of suburban and ageing Gladsdale Baptist Church and its partnership with a nursery that rescued it financially two decades ago, and its exploration of a second partnership with a charity with older people. Partnerships can be with government, business, other local voluntary organizations, interfaith initiatives or other churches. It is important to clarify the politics, policies and practices of a potential partnership, and the degree of formality and shared resourcing involved. The more complex the relationship, the more integration is needed – there is a cost and time involved. As the early church developed a partnership between apostles and deacons to meet material needs (Acts 6:1-6), the Holy Spirit can guide the church today to distribute resources and exercise power appropriately. But different church forms will approach partnerships differently. Parish churches often cooperate through their minister as their boundary-spanning representative. Gathered congregations tend to work through task groups or committees. Small-group churches will more likely supply volunteers in multiple directions than partner with one particular project. Third-place churches will more likely grow or multiply its own thing, except for the partnership with their hosting venue. Magnet churches may support compatible para-church groups or welcome new activities into their orbit, but like third-place and small-group churches are less likely than parish and gathered congregations to develop formal partnerships. Partnerships are worth pursuing, but need skilled outside help to form and need a forum for negotiating politics, policies and practices. This is relevant to my church denomination as we explore what it means to be 'better together for mission'.

Each different form can subvert the gospel, but engaged thoughtfully can function missionally and subvert un-Christlike aspects of contemporary culture. For example, my Baptist church context is typically of a gathered congregation as a voluntary association. For us, church expresses the truth that all believers exercise ministry to neighbours. Missiologically we offer an alternative society that resists cultural compromise and points to the Kingdom of God. Unfortunately, we may subvert the gospel by gathering only those who are alike. But our advantage is we can subvert a culture of consumerism by supporting one another in radical discipleship.

*Resourcing Mission* is a useful primer on ecclesiology and ethnology, illustrating practical theology issues with live congregational issues and cases. I will be using it on my textbook list for a case study-based course in congregational transformation. It is a valuable resource for anyone seeking to understand or help congregations – research students, consultants, pastors or local volunteer leaders.

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