

‘Robin Greenwood is now one of the most experienced and effective guides to transforming congregations and their communities. His wisdom is deeply and imaginatively biblical, centred on God and God’s generous blessing, and utterly realistic about the Church and our society. He draws readers into the fullest life possible: following Jesus, living in praise and becoming a blessing. A book full of promise for the local church.’

*Professor David Ford, Regius Professor of Divinity
University of Cambridge*

‘This is without doubt a book for our times: essential reading and essential practice for all who yearn for a better way for churches than endless initiatives, mission statements and strategies.’

The Rt Revd James Bell, Bishop of Ripon

‘Robin Greenwood has done it again. *Sharing God’s Blessing* offers a creative, thoughtful, clear and accessible approach to being the people of God in transitional and challenging times. It is a book rich in practical wisdom, born of seasoned experience and theological reflection. There is something for everybody and it will be particularly helpful, stimulating, and a source of blessing for the local church.’

*The Rt Revd Professor Stephen Pickard, Executive Director
Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture
Charles Sturt University, Barton, Australia*

‘In bringing insights and practices from participatory and appreciative inquiry to church renewal, Robin Greenwood provides a practical and theologically rich approach to conversation in church communities. Conversation in these modes allows for individual and communal appreciation of God’s blessing to be shared and to be the lenses through which practical issues in a local church are examined, explored

and addressed. These approaches also provide the ground on which we can learn and develop rich knowledge of how to engage local churches in renewal from within.'

*David Coghlan, Professor in Organization Development
Trinity College, Dublin; Co-editor of
The Sage Encyclopedia of Action Research*

'This volume, with its positive contributions and practical focus on God's blessing, is full of guidelines, stories and wisdom for diocesan and local church leaders, indeed for all seeking deeper insight into God's transforming love. This book is a joy to read and a blessing.'

*Dr Fredrica Harris Thompsett, Mary Wolfe Professor
Emerita of Historical Theology, Episcopal Divinity
School, Cambridge, Massachusetts*

'*Sharing God's Blessing* provides a valuable resource and a process allowing a group of people very quickly to develop an atmosphere of trust, within which to ask difficult and deeply felt questions, share life experiences at an extra-ordinary level of painfulness and depth, be silent together, laugh and talk together, and discover a greater awareness of being blessed, of where God comes into our lives, and of joy in the church community. Robin Greenwood has provided a vital resource for groups of Christians to take responsibility for their own learning and to spend time exploring what really matters to particular people in specific situations.'

*The Revd Louise Taylor-Kenyon, Vicar of the Parish of
Embsay with Eastby, Diocese of West Yorkshire and the Dales
and Clergy Continuing Ministerial Development Officer
in the Ripon and Bradford Episcopal Areas*

'Combining the themes of group conversation with blessing has been very helpful for our young adults. It brought together a group of those desiring conversation at a deeper level. In the past we had struggled to attract people to Bible study but through this material we have developed a more intimate conversation helping us to grow in our knowledge of God and value our relationships with one another. We gained insight into how we could be a blessing to

others throughout our extended church community. We shall continue the journey.’

*Jill Foster, Lay Worker with Students and Young Adults
Brunswick Methodist Church, Newcastle*

‘This resource by Robin Greenwood takes us into new places as congregations are supported on a journey to recognize and celebrate the blessings in their life together. Here is an innovative way of exchanging and reflecting on God’s ways and purposes in communal Christian living through accompanied and structured conversation. Tested in the life of churches in the UK and USA, transformational conversations are shown to be a key to growing greater intimacy with God, society, others and our deepest selves. Congregations will be refreshed and affirmed in engaging with this material. There are also signposts for how churches can move from focusing on their survival to becoming a blessing in their context.’

Canon Dr Malcolm Grundy, Visiting Fellow, York St John University

‘Our church’s involvement in the Participatory Action Research project leading up to the publication of *Sharing God’s Blessing* has been of enormous benefit to us. Shy and often inarticulate Christians blossomed through feeling safe to share their inner thoughts and aspirations. We have grown in our recognition that a community can only be a living reality through participating – we find the courage to “work upon” ourselves and let Christ transform us. Far from being threatening, as inward change can often be, it is becoming apparent that we are finding joy through the emergence of renewed relationships with God and our church and neighbourhood.’

*The Revd Martin Gilham, Parish Priest
St James, Shilbottle, Diocese of Newcastle*

‘*Sharing God’s Blessing* combines deeply theological insight with immense practical wisdom. Particularly valuable are Robin’s reflections on the role of the “companion” in enabling church communities to grow in mutual trust, understanding and confidence. These are surely marks of a community that knows itself to be blessed by God and that will be equipped to share the fruits of that blessing with others.’

*The Revd Simon Cowling, Rector of Priory Church of
St Mary and St Cuthbert*

‘Robin Greenwood’s *Sharing God’s Blessing* offers an encouraging lens through which to view and review the life and mission of the local church. The discipline of putting blessings first frames thinking and conversation about God and the church in a life-giving way. The hope of blessing brings into clear focus questions around the mission and ministry of the church and positively animates church group conversations.’

*The Revd Rachel Wood, Local Ministry Development Officer
Diocese of Newcastle*

‘Taking part in conversations on blessing has helped our church develop confidence to say what we think; to trust each other to listen; and to value what others say, even if we disagree. It has helped us to value each other more and build a community of trust, mutual responsibility and commitment.

‘It has challenged us to think about what we are here for, what our mission is and what each can do to enable the vision of the church to be realized. It has empowered each of us to believe that our contribution matters. It has helped us cope with trauma and uncertainty and to accept and embrace change.’

*The Revd Sarah Miller, Vicar with the wardens
of Newbiggin Hall, Newcastle*

‘Robin Greenwood has provided Lutherans with a resource to lead us into the study of Scripture around the theme of blessing. More than that, it opens us holistically to new ways of seeing mission and ministry through conversations on our relating both personally and as a community to the presence and activity of God. Participating in conversations on blessing has helped our church develop confidence, in affirming the gifts we have and amplifying what is possible by God’s grace. At a time when many lament the loss of Christendom, Robin stimulates our church to know God’s blessing more abundantly, releasing our church for further acts of compassion in our neighbourhood.’

*The Revd Dr Richard O. Hill, Pastor of Hope Lutheran Church
and Dean of the Peconic Conference, Selden, New York*

‘From his long experience in parish and diocesan ministry, combined with two years attentive companionship to particular local churches, Robin Greenwood in this book offers companionship to all with

responsibility for nurturing churches at this time. He offers approaches, encouragement, and support for finding the courage to travel slowly, listening deeply to one another in conversations of honesty. This resource encourages and demonstrates practices for churches to discover again God's healing life-giving abundance in the midst of institutional turmoil and messy personal lives. Here we are called, companioned and blessed by the God who draws us to be "beloved".'

The Revd Caroline Pascoe, Development Officer, Diocese of Hereford

'*Sharing God's Blessing* has been a real encouragement to us at the "Crooked Spire" as we explore further how God is calling us to be a blessing for each other and for our town. It has encouraged tentative Christians to become faithful, and faithful Christians to become witnesses. It has started us on a new way of working together where honesty is constructive and all have a gifting and a place.'

The Revd Patrick Coleman, Vicar of St Mary and All Saints, Chesterfield

'Reading this book filled me with joy. Above all, the sense of delight came from being reminded so comprehensively that the Beloved blesses us more than we can imagine and that we too are to be a blessing, but was replenished over and over by the practical stories, sound theology and effective tools that had been developed from a process in which the participants in ministry were at the heart. Ecumenical in scope and deeply local in focus, I look forward to using this resource to companion God's people seeking to be who they are called to be. There is indeed hope!'

Jenny Dawson, Ministry Developer, Anglican Church in Aotearoa, New Zealand and Polynesia

'Robin Greenwood continues to contribute to thinking about the future being of the Church. By combining appreciative enquiry with a deep sense of how we are blessed by God, Greenwood establishes the ground for conversations that can enable the Church to be a blessing to the community within which it finds itself. Rather than focusing on what the Church has lost and what the Church doesn't have, Greenwood supplies us with an approach that moves us forward, based on what we do have and how we are blessed by God. I look forward to seeing how this can impact the life of the Church.'

The Rt Revd John Stead, Bishop of Willochra, Australia

*Dedicated to those church communities,
especially in the North-East of England,
who have generously opened their doors and
their hearts to me, feeding my imagination,
as well as my body*

Robin Greenwood, William Leech Research Fellow, St John's College, Durham University, is a practical ecclesologist. For over four decades, he has held posts in parishes, cathedrals and training teams. His most recent local church responsibility was as Vicar of St Mary the Virgin, Monkseaton, Newcastle. He is a Canon Emeritus of Chelmsford Cathedral, contributes to diocesan programmes in the UK, the USA and Australia, and has been co-director of the Edward King Institute for Ministerial Development. His many titles for SPCK include *Being Church: The Formation of Christian Community* (2013), *Being God's People: The Confirmation and Discipleship Handbook* (2011), *Parish Priests: For the Sake of the Kingdom* (2009), *The Ministry Team Handbook: Local Ministry as Partnership* (2000) and *Transforming Priesthood: A New Theology of Mission and Ministry* (1994). His wife Claire is also an Anglican priest, and they are parents to Peter, Tim and Katherine and seven grandchildren.

Also by Robin Greenwood

- 1988 *Reclaiming the Church*, Collins
- 1994 *Transforming Priesthood: A New Theology of Mission and Ministry*
- 1999 *Practising Community: The Work of the Local Church*
- 2000 *The Ministry Team Handbook: Local Ministry as Partnership*
- 2002 *Transforming Church: Liberating Structures for Ministry*
- 2005 *Power: Changing Society and Churches* (with Hugh Burgess)
- 2006 *Local Ministry: Story, Process and Meaning* (with Caroline Pascoe)
- 2006 *Risking Everything: Growing Communities of Love*
- 2009 *Parish Priests: For the Sake of the Kingdom*
- 2011 *Being God's People: The Confirmation and Discipleship Handbook*
(with Sue Hart)
- 2013 *Being Church: The Formation of Christian Community*

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Sharing God's Blessing

How to renew the local church

ROBIN GREENWOOD



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Foreword

This is without doubt a book for our times: essential reading and essential practice for all who yearn for a better way for churches than endless initiatives, organizational readjustments, mission statements and strategies. In many places I encounter churches with a mood of ‘hanging on in there’, and too many Christian communities appear to live out of a sense of deficit, inadequacy, insufficiency – what Robin Greenwood calls ‘the myth of scarcity’. Recovering the recognition of blessing is to regain the capacity to live out of sufficiency, abundance, surfeit and grace. ‘God has given us all that we need’, as Samuel Wells repeatedly affirms in *God’s Companions*. ‘To you is given the secret of the Kingdom of God’, declares the Lord, and Robin invites us through themes of blessing, conversation and story to embrace that gift and ‘use processes that release the energy of the whole Church’.

We are offered a realistic, eye-witness account of where we are at, not least the ‘difficult environment for faith’, but with a refreshing and energizing focus on the grace and gifts of God, showered on his people in Jesus and the outpouring of the Spirit. As always, Robin goes to the heart of the matter, and the heart of the matter for grasping the possibilities of God’s future is conversation – with God, with the Scriptures, with one another. If they are to take the responsibility entrusted to them in baptism, Christian people need to articulate for themselves what it feels like to be living in the contexts they inhabit and an increasingly secular culture, and what God might be saying to his Church in these times. We are pointed to ‘growing habits of conversation-based transformation’. Some of us live with the vivid memory of how shared conversations, in which members of the General Synod learned to regard one another as persons deserving attention and respect, transformed the process leading to the passing of the legislation for the ordination of women as bishops. Robin offers the philosophy, process, practicalities and motivation for such transformative conversations locally.

.....

Stories of transformation emerge, like the one from a Christian community of which it is said, ‘they’ve decided to stop living in the tomb created for laity centuries ago’, stories of churches that have participated in Action Research conversations, informed by Appreciative Inquiry, and found themselves surprised by the guidance and grace of God released through the engagement and encounter.

Not surprisingly from the author of *Transforming Priesthood* and so many other reflections on the themes of ministry and community, there is a very welcome focus on the corporate reality of being Church, being Christian, being disciples of Jesus, which, of course, requires a new appreciation of the need for collegial habits and practices in the leadership of the Church. Also, as one might expect from such an exponent of Trinitarian theology, there is the offer of a renewed appreciation of the practice of hospitality, at the heart of the Christian gospel and yet so much neglected in the Church of the west, manifesting so much of the individualism and social divisions of the culture. Through the whole, to be sure, the reader will encounter the call of the Trinity into mutual regard and attention, to the love that offers life endlessly.

If the Reform and Renewal programme is vital as a response to the challenges of our times from the national institutions of the Church of England, *Sharing God’s Blessing* may be even more significant as a resource for the renewal of the local church. I should rejoice to see its theory and practice widely used in the Ripon Episcopal Area! Profound and practical, insightful and accessible, this book will I am sure be a blessing to those who use it to find themselves becoming the blessing God has called them to be.

The Rt Revd James Bell, Bishop of Ripon

Thanks

This book is a contribution to reframing the culture, identity and confidence of churches in the light of God's blessing. It springs from engaging with many local churches and their leaders – their everyday living, hopes, traumas, griefs and delight, in the light of God's blessing. I gladly own debts of gratitude to many people and churches who have contributed or made this project possible. To the William Leech Foundation for funding my tenure of a Research Fellowship in the period 2013–15. To those who have allowed me to be part of their lives and have given me generous hospitality. To the Newcastle upon Tyne Church of England Institute Trust and to St John's College, University of Durham. To the Durham University Centre for Social Justice and Community Action committed to the systemic change of institutions.

To churches and clergy that have travelled closely with me in this project and 'road-tested' parts of this book, especially St Wilfrid's, Newbiggin Hall, Brunswick Methodist Church, Newcastle, St Thomas Aquinas and Holy Family, Darlington and St James, Shilbottle. Also for road-testing some of this material, to Hope Lutheran Church, Selden, New York, St Mary and All Saints, Chesterfield, The Priory Church of St Mary and St Cuthbert, Bolton Abbey, the United Benefice of Barnoldswick with Bracewell, All Saints, Hurworth, The United Benefice of Christchurch, Skipton with Carleton, St Peter's Addingham, and the parish of St Mary's Embsay with Eastby. To the clergy and laity in those churches and all whose responses to drafts of this material have made a difference to its accessibility and design. To fellow 'companions' for supporting me and churches through this period: Peter Kenny, Pat Moran, Diane Westmorland and Rachel Wood. To Arthur Frances, Colin Gough, Richard Hill, David Russell, Louise Taylor-Kenyon and Diane Weaver for permission to quote from their accounts of events. To former colleagues at St Mary's Monkseaton, and especially to Sue Hart for technical and design support during the trialling of some of this material. I have been grateful to Brunswick

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