

Book Review by Rebecka Cotterill

Tomlin, Graham. *The Widening Circle: Priesthood as God's Way of Blessing the World*. London: SPCK, 2014

Reverend Dr Graham Tomlin has published a number of works on topics around spiritual formation, theology, the church and its praxis. In his most recent book he specifically deals with the issue of priesthood. The approach to articulate a theology of priesthood needs, according to Tomlin, to begin with a theological assessment of the issue, rather than a historical or chronological one. This suggests that a theological understanding of priesthood begins in the nature and activity of God, who primarily can be seen through the person and work of Christ (Tomlin 2014:4). Tomlin therefore particularly explores the understanding of participation in relation to leadership by arguing that any leadership role within the church serves as a function where, by grace, the leader participates in Jesus' priestly activity and any such leadership within the church only bears witness to, and serves, the headship of Christ (2014:143). The ambiguity surrounding the office of priest especially in regards to authority is therefore dealt with by offering an understanding that incorporates the priesthood of all believers, yet acknowledges the role and function of priestly leadership as a distinct part which purposes lies in blessing the whole of the church. As he specifically highlights that (in contrast to many managerial contexts) spiritual leadership in the church is by its nature very different in understanding as its authority is loaned – “for the purpose of blessing, not owned for the purpose of power” (2014:144). When understanding priesthood as originally designed to bless the world, it suggests that power is not delegated to a specific group, but rather, its function and authority are borrowed, which minimises the danger of clerical monarchism. Tomlin's understanding of priesthood is therefore not only Christocentric in its approach, but manages to faithfully embody a trinitarian theology especially in regards to authority.

On the other hand, in critique of Tomlin's theological approach of priesthood, a process for how a model of shared authority works in practice needs to be carefully considered and clarified. There are situations, such as during crises which exposes shared authority models as it questions who is ultimately responsible as the leader. However, it needs to be acknowledged that Tomlin's sound approach to priesthood and understanding of shared authority offers a refreshing and transformative theology of priesthood for contemporary leadership within the church.