

A unique ministry of communicating the Gospel in today's culture

Excellence in Leadership: Essays in Honour of Peter & Merrill Corney, edited by Denise Cooper-Clarke and Stephen Hale (Sydney: Acorn Press \$19.99)

reviewed by Steve Bradbury

PUBLISHED ON the occasion of Peter Corney's 80th Birthday, this book is a fitting celebration of the truly remarkable ministry of Peter and Merrill, in particular their work at St Hilary's Anglican Church in the years 1965-2002. But more than that, it is a highly illuminating exploration of what made that ministry so impactful. Thus it has significant relevance for anyone committed to developing local congregations as communities willing and able to be carriers and conveyors of the gospel in contemporary culture.

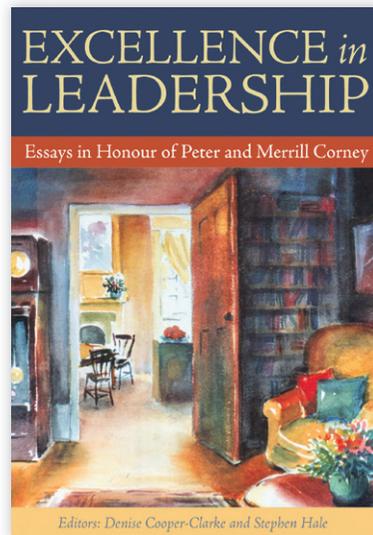
In his introduction Stephen Hale explains that one of the key purposes of the book was to wrestle with two primary questions: "What was the unique contribution of Peter and Merrill Corney in a range of areas? What responses should we be reflecting upon in doing mission and ministry today?" Good questions, and collectively the reflections of each author in this collection of essays give us much to ponder on. My own pondering is that of one who was a direct benefi-

ciary of the ministries of both Peter and Merrill during the 25 years my wife and I were part of St Hilary's, and one who is very thankful for their input and leadership.

As I read the book further, key questions preoccupied my mind: what was it about Peter and Merrill's ministry that made it so effective? What were the key principles (theological, ecclesiological and missiological) and practices that informed and shaped their ministry? The book's feast of answers to these questions has much to offer to churches and church leadership in every context, but in a short review I can only focus on a few key themes.

At the very heart of the Corneys' work at St Hilary's was their utter conviction that the church is called to give witness to a profoundly counter-cultural and transformational gospel, and that this witness is through both word and deed. Such witness requires a deep understanding of the culture in which St Hilary's was embedded, a reading of that culture in the light of God's word, and the nurturing of disciples with a radical love for Jesus (p.116).

Peter was and is an astute social anthropologist, able to speak with exceptional relevance to each new generation of youth and young adults as they came into the St



Hilary's orbit (p.43). Dave Fuller quotes from an article by Peter in which he reflects on Helmut Thielicke's assertion that "The gospel must be constantly forwarded to a new address, because the recipient is always changing place of residence." Peter writes:

We are living through radical change in the way Western people view the world, the way they understand reality and truth... The change and its impact on education, politics, religion and popular culture is so fundamental that it is critical for Christians to understand this change – and what it means for communicating the gospel today

and for living as Christians in contemporary society.

While it was the specific focus of one chapter, nearly every author drew attention to the remarkable creativity that characterised Peter and Merrill's ministry. It could be experienced in their careful crafting of worship and outreach services, in Peter's preaching, and in their tutelage and empowerment of generations of communicators and musicians. But nowhere could it be experienced more fully than when listening to one of Merrill's entrancing stories which held children (their target audience) and adults equally captivated (p.69).

Several of the authors highlighted the integrity and authenticity of the Corneys. They practised what they preached (p.166), and teaching by example is the most potent of pedagogies! The book includes a story about the time one of the sons slept in the laundry so that a neighbour in need could have his bedroom. I never heard a reference to this or other similar actions in a single Corney sermon – but imagine the integrity neighbour-love such as this brought to Peter and Merrill's teaching about God's love and our love for God. No wonder they have significantly influenced the lives of so many parishioners (170).

In concluding her reflections on the Corneys' ministry Deborah Storie writes:

The practice of hope is a profoundly countercultural enterprise. How can we muster the collective spiritual, moral and cultural resources to come to grips with the crises engulfing our world while looking beyond them to imagine and create just and merciful life-giving alternatives? Only in the Spirit. Only with community. Only through repentance. Only by grace. Only as ambassadors of Christ. (176)

In the light of other insights offered by Deborah and the book's other authors, I would want to insert one more sentence into her astute summation: *Only informed by the word of God.*

Excellence in Leadership is a winsome collection of grateful reflections. It fully achieves what it set out to be, and it leaves me hankering for a sequel – a more thorough and in-depth analysis of an exceptionally remarkable ministry, a practical guidebook for the next generation of people called to lead local congregations.

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