

The Authors

We cannot begin this book before situating the authors and their positions. Reflexivity is important in practical theology since there are no neutral standpoints. It matters that we all declare here, in different ways, our interest in the subject of the book and that, it turns out, we are all educated and privileged white people of a certain generation from the UK and the US.

TIMOTHY CARSON

Professor of the Liminality Seminar in the Honors College of the University of Missouri, and co-founder of the Guild for Engaged Liminality.

Following many years serving as a parish pastor, Tim continues to write, edit, blog, facilitate groups and seminars focused on liminality, and work with people making life's great passages.

As a pastor who served for decades in parish ministry, I have long experience sharing voluntary and involuntary liminal states with both individuals and communities. For a long time, I had no name for that which I knew so well. However, in the course of developing my dissertation for a professional doctorate, I came upon a key that would in turn open many locks: liminality. Once discovered, I found its concepts and insights eminently helpful. This resulted not only in a dissertation focused on liminality but a book, one that has been sourced by many in their own searches in the discipline.

The interpretive lens provided by liminal studies enabled me to serve as a liminal guide to individuals passing through dramatic passages, mindfully design and conduct rites of passage in the church context, and interpret large cultural disruptions. This became exceedingly helpful in times of major social emergency, such as the attacks of 9/11, natural disasters, and even and especially this time of the Covid-19 pandemic.

My own experiences with loss, change, and moving through the liminal margins have amplified my perspective on liminality, and I have been enriched by international experiences in which the societies I have visited either inhabit marginal places or still retain and practice rites and rituals of transformation.

Presently, I enjoy teaching students about liminality, consulting with persons making great passages, sharing workshops on life's great liminal transitions, writing in the field, and working with colleagues who have parallel interest and expertise.

It was my great pleasure to meet Nigel and Rosy during a sabbatical leave in the British Isles and later to extend our shared interests in this book project. Similarly, I discovered Lisa through her research and writing in the liminal arena and our friendship continued as co-founders of the Guild for Engaged Liminality. We have, on both sides of the Atlantic, brought together minds and hearts devoted to the singular purpose of creating a long overdue practical theology of liminality.

ROSY FAIRHURST

*Vicar, St. Augustine's and St. Clement's Churches, Bradford, UK.
Formerly Organizational Consultant with the Grubb Institute and
Canon Chancellor of Leicester Cathedral.*

My involvement with this book stemmed from a fascination with concepts which had been developed from a sustained observation of experience so that our seeing works both with the deeply conceptual and with the "here and now" of current experience. I first encountered liminality when studying for a psychology of religion paper; I found it really helpful in relation to Winnicott's work on object relations theory and, in particular, his thinking about transitional space.

In 1997, on the day I handed my MA dissertation in at Heythrop College, St. James's Park just down the road, was becoming a shrine to Princess Diana after her sudden and shocking death as

the result of a car accident in Paris. This triggered an extraordinary and unprecedented outpouring of grief across society. It was as though all that had not been able to be mourned, which had had no expression or vocabulary, now spilled out into consciousness through the flowers and notes which flooded the grounds of St. James's Palace and it became a place of pilgrimage. The Franciscans became chaplains in the space and managed the tribute—though there were books of condolences in most cathedrals in the land—and it seemed to me this was a huge real-life liminal moment for our culture.

Later I discovered the Pacific Rim, the interface between West and East on the coast of California when on sabbatical there. I was working on liminality for an exhibition in Santa Barbara. With its awesome coastline—especially at Big Sur—and the missions along the way up the coast, with their extraordinary fusion of Hispanic, Mexican and Native American art and spirituality—it's hard to think of a more liminal place. However, the opposite is also true—California can certainly “do” image and shallow.

My stay was cut short by the sudden death of my father back in England but that interruption allowed my engagement with organizational analysis at the Grubb Institute to inform the subject, and, in particular, my work with the Transforming Clergy Leadership conferences (see Chapter Seven) which the Institute had been developing over 30 years. I took over leading these conferences, and from there evolved a particularly fruitful partnership with Nigel Rooms, at that time, Director of Ministry and Mission for the English Anglican Diocese of Southwell and Nottingham, in taking clergy from the diocese through this process over a period of four or five years. This book has evolved from that collaboration, first, with Nigel and then, later, our two American collaborators. We all bring, I hope in fruitful partnership, our own backgrounds and perspectives.

NIGEL ROOMS

Leader – Partnership for Missional Church UK, Church Mission Society Associate Priest (SSM) St. Peter's, Braunstone Park, Leicester Diocese. Editor, Practical Theology, and Co-Editor, Ecclesial Futures. Honorary Research Fellow, The Queen's Foundation, Birmingham. Freelance researcher, consultant, facilitator, author, editor, and spiritual director.

I was introduced to liminality and the importance of anthropology as a partner in doing theology and mission when studying for a Master's degree in the early 1990s. While my tutor, Gordon Oliver, has not taught me everything I know, I am very grateful for his wisdom over the years, especially his advice to "read Victor Turner on that." I initially struggled to comprehend why the location of my curacy training¹ in the Staffordshire Potteries was such a peculiar and particular place. The anthropological ideas in liminal theory helped me to understand, both the formation of the Potteries in the massive expansion and transition that was the industrial revolution and the nature of structured space that is named and loved as home. I now also understood more of my own journey since Stoke and Hull, where I grew up, were in fact very similar places with "thick" boundaries around them. People either stayed for good or, like me, left, hardly ever to return. At the same time, I was discovering what it means to be a priest, both lovingly and deeply committed to the place of the Parish as a living breathing community and properly free from it or "other" to it.

I then worked in Tanzania for seven years as a Mission Partner with the Diocese of Mount Kilimanjaro. During this period, I was crossing cultures and learning a new language in order to be alongside the Tanzanian Church in its joys and struggles. I learned to take the time to make the transition, to negotiate the change. This was true both when I began the project I was asked to undertake and when I returned to UK after it was complete. I saw at first hand how important good liminal experiences were for the formation of identity in traditional societies and how the Christian Church had not always understood these. Thus, the "glue" of society had often been thoughtlessly broken down without anything to replace it.

Returning to the UK, I studied for six years part-time to gain a professional doctorate in missiology, and found a role in Nottinghamshire. There, as part of my studies, I began to reflect both on notions of Englishness (since I was now partly *Mswahili*—a proper local Tanzanian) and on the place I once again found myself living in. I began to see Nottinghamshire as a liminal place in England, not least because the Robin Hood legend locates itself

1. Church of England ministers have an extended training after seminary as an assistant minister – they are called curates and they train in a "curacy."

there (more of this later), but also I saw my own life and perhaps calling to be somewhat liminal, both as a priest and theologian as well as working in the reflective space between action and reflection, practice and the “academy.” The Church is placed in the midst of the massive current transition our Western society is undergoing. My experience and reflection as someone who has negotiated cultural boundaries bring some wisdom to bear on the challenge before the Church in our generation. The experience of working with Rosy on the Transforming Clergy Leadership conferences helped me to see the deep challenges we face and the courage and energy required to begin to do anything about them.

All of this biography now comes together with my current project within the Church Mission Society—a partnership with Church Innovations in the US and, in particular, its founder, Pat Keifert. We attempt, through the three-year Partnership for Missional Church process, to enable deep cultural transformation in congregations which will enable them to faithfully make the transition to a place where they can be church with, for and against the world they now find themselves in. Creating such change through deep, sometimes chaotic and painful liminal processes, is one of the biggest challenges we face.

LISA R. WITHROW

Founder, Clear Transition Strategies (Withrow & Associates, LLC) – a leadership coaching and consulting business, and co-founder of the Guild for Engaged Liminality.

Former Professor of Church Leadership (1999-2019) and Vice President for Academic Affairs and Academic Dean, Methodist Theological School in Ohio.

Research Fellow at Durham University (Autumn 2014).

Ordained Clergy in the United Methodist Church.

I first learned of liminality decades ago when I encountered an experience of “thin places” in the Scottish Western Isles; I began to pay attention to two aspects of “thinness” ever after. First is the sense that there is indeed a collective unconscious that moves in us and around us, weaving the present with the past—and the collective is not limited to humanity. Second is the sense that the ethereal and the tangible meet and dance in these places, where the veil between them is indeed thin. Soon after my first experience, I paid attention to liminality as invitation to adventure

and transformation, helped by travel immersions, connection with nature with and without my camera, and spending time on the water in my kayak, simply being present.

I have taught and written about liminal space for dozens of years since my formative “thin place” experience. As a long-time student of change theory, conflict management in systems, and leadership development, I have combined the spiritual with the practical dimensions of these subjects in my scholarship, teaching, and professional coaching endeavours. Facilitating “learning containers” is one of the most energizing and humbling acts I can imagine. Life is full of moving into and out of liminality—some immersions into that space occurred by intention, some by surprise. All, in time, is blessing.

It seems strange to me that I have never met the other three authors of this collective work face-to-face. Yet, I am honoured to be one representative of thought in this volume. I raise gratitude to Timothy Carson for “finding” me online while I was writing another book on liminality and temporarily dwelling in a tiny Nova Scotian town with a one-room library, a bakery, and a borrowed cottage on the sea. Thin.

The Authors' Individual Contributions

The conception and writing of this book took several years and turned into a deeply collaborative project across the Atlantic. While each chapter was initially written by one (or two) of us, we all read and commented on each other's work. Nigel took on the task of editing the whole into a single, (we hope) focused book. For readers who are interested, Nigel, with Rosy, wrote the Introduction and Chapter One, Rosy, Chapter Two and Nigel Chapters Three, Six, Seven and Twelve. Tim contributed Chapters Four, Five and Eleven, and Lisa, Chapters Eight, Nine and Ten.

Other Relevant Publications and Resources from the Authors

TIMOTHY CARSON

Liminal Reality and Transformational Power: Revised Edition: Transition, Renewal and Hope (Cambridge: Lutterworth Press, 2016)

Editor of *Neither Here nor There: The Many Voices of Liminality* (Cambridge: Lutterworth Press, 2019)

Curator of www.theliminalityproject.org

ROSY FAIRHURST

Uncovering Sin: A Gateway to Healing and Calling (London: SPCK, 2012)

NIGEL ROOMS

The Faith of the English: Integrating Christ and Culture (London: SPCK, 2011)

“Deep Listening: A Call for Missionary Anthropology,”
Theology, 15 (2) (March/April 2012) pp. 99-108

Editor with Gavin Wakefield of *Northern Gospel Northern Church: Reflections on Identity and Mission* (Durham: Sacristy Press, 2016)

Missional Church: What Does Good Look Like? (Cambridge: Grove, 2019)

With Adrian Chatfield, *Soul Friendship: A Practical Theology of Spiritual Direction* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2019)

“Understanding Local Churches as Porous Living Systems: Insights from the Tavistock Tradition,” *Ecclesial Practices*, 6 (2) (2019) pp. 182-97

LISA R. WITHROW

Leadership in the Unknown: Thresholds to the Future (Cambridge: Lutterworth, 2020)

Claiming New Life: Process-Church for the Future (St Louis MO: Chalice Press, 2008)

Editor and author of *Alienation and Connection: Suffering in a Global Age* (New York NY: Lexington, 2011)

Numerous articles on leadership development in the *Journal of Religious Leadership*

Blogger on *Liminal Space* (Wordpress.com)