TRANSLOCAL MINISTRY AFTER CHRISTENDOM

Stuart Murray

Early in the fourth century, the Roman emperor Constantine I identified himself as a Christian and initiated the process of accommodating church and state that would result in the establishment of the sacral society known as Christendom.[1] He quickly recognised that the support of the church's translocal leaders – the bishops – was the key to achieving his aim of constructing a united empire-wide church, with the help of which he might confront the many social, political and cultural problems that were destabilising and fragmenting his realm.[2]

Constantine wooed these men through patronage of their interests, extensive financial support for their congregations and ambitious building projects, delegating to them social responsibilities and status beyond their congregations and frequent invitations to dine with him in imperial surroundings. In 325, he summoned them to Nicaea for an ecumenical council to determine a creedal basis for a united church – a church that would no longer be dependent for its cohesion primarily on friendship and mutual respect between churches within which divergent patterns, traditions and emphases flourished.

Translocal ministry, in both theory and practice, was significantly and permanently impacted by what historians call the *Christendom shift*. The changing focus and functions of fourth-century bishops were early indications of what lay ahead.

Christendom and translocal ministry

The role and authority of bishops had been developing during previous decades, especially during the second half of the third century, as churches expanded in size and influence in many parts of the empire. A gradual (though contested) movement towards hierarchy, clericalism and institutionalisation – detectable even in the New Testament – had gathered pace in the past half-century. But the Christendom shift exacerbated these tendencies and introduced new elements into the theory and practice of translocal ministry. Identifying and assessing these developments and their legacy will help us discern which remain appropriate as we negotiate the further shift from Christendom to post-Christendom, and which are problematic in this changing context.

Among the main effects of the Christendom shift on translocal ministry were the following:

- As the centre of gravity in the church shifted away from local congregations towards a translocal institution, fewer decisions about faith and practice were taken locally. *Doctrinal discussions* took place in translocal gatherings and agreed formulae were imposed on local churches. *Church discipline* was

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[1] For further details, see the authoritative collection of essays in Alan Kreider (Ed.): *The Origins of Christendom in the West* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2002).

[2] See H.A. Drake: *Constantine and the Bishops: The Politics of Intolerance* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2000).

exercised by translocal leaders and conferences without reference to the congregations to which those placed under discipline belonged. *Missionary initiatives* were undertaken by individuals or organisations commissioned by and accountable to translocal bodies rather than congregations.

- The close and long-term relationship between congregations and those who exercised local leadership[3] was transformed into a serial form of ministry. A clerical caste developed, who exercised local ministry for shorter periods in various contexts before transferring to another as servants of an institutional church. Local ministry, in fact, developed into local expressions of what was essentially now a translocal role. Church leaders owed primary allegiance to the translocal church and were deployed locally for periods of service before moving on (sometimes, it seems, mainly to enhance their career prospects).

- The emergence of a territorial diocesan and, later, parish system within an increasingly bureaucratic church imposed severe restrictions on translocal ministry that was unauthorised by church authorities. Wandering preachers were perceived (sometimes rightly) as threats to good order, not welcomed as gifts from the wider church. Translocal ministry became institutional and restrictive, with bishops defending their territorial rights, excluding other expressions of translocal ministry.

- Gradually, as the boundaries of Christendom were established, within which it was assumed all were Christians, translocal ministry lost all vestiges of its earlier missional focus and became thoroughly maintenance-oriented. Those who exercised translocal ministries were responsible for sustaining what was rather than bringing into being what was not yet. Only beyond the boundaries of Christendom were missional expressions of translocal ministry feasible or perceived as necessary.

- Consequently, the gifts needed for translocal ministry were redefined. The creativity, flexibility and pioneering spirit required for missional forms of translocal ministry were supplanted by the organisational and institutional abilities of those responsible for managing a large, wealthy and socially influential organisation. What we might term 'apostolic' and 'prophetic' forms of translocal ministry were regarded as obsolete (both theologically and practically) in an era when translocal ministry had become essentially pastoral and administrative.

Translocal ministry, then, was both enhanced and restricted by the Christendom shift, as its focus and modus operandi were adapted to the changing context. The legacy of the Christendom era includes both structures and ways of thinking about translocal ministry that need to be reconsidered as this context changes again and churches from many traditions grapple with the challenges of post-Christendom. Understanding the Christendom era and discerning which elements of its ecclesiology are helpful or disabling in post-Christendom is crucial for developing appropriate expressions of translocal ministry today.

Translocal ministry on the margins

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[3] See Everett Ferguson: 'The Congregationalism of the Early Church' in Daniel Williams: *The Free Church and the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), pp130-135.

There are other models of translocal ministry from the Christendom era to help us work towards a contextually apt and ecclesiologically coherent expression of translocal ministry. On the margins (and subject to pressure from both secular and ecclesiastical authorities) were several dissident movements, whose rejection of the Christendom system was accompanied by creative thinking about many aspects of local church life and by experimentation with alternative models of translocal ministry.

These groups do not offer a fully-fledged theology of translocal ministry, immediately transferable structures or strategies for our very different context (any more than New Testament examples of translocal ministry provide a blueprint for contemporary practice). Furthermore, information about most of these movements is limited, since a primary responsibility of the more conventional state church translocal ministers who suppressed them was to eradicate their supposedly heretical writings.

But there are glimpses of principles and practices operating within medieval and early modern movements such as the Waldensians, Lollards and Anabaptists[4] that might stimulate creative thinking about appropriate forms of translocal ministry today. There are also warnings within these movements about the tendency of innovative expressions of translocal ministry to revert to the default forms embodied so powerfully in the dominant Christendom system. Translocal ministry, it seems, is particularly vulnerable to institutional retrenchment and loss of mission dynamism.

What can we learn from models of translocal ministry on the margins?

Translocal ministry can be dynamic. Waldensians, Lollards and Anabaptists all recognised that their scattered congregations needed to be visited and resourced by those whose experience and gifts equipped them for this task. Some of this activity in the early years appears to have taken place with minimal coordination and without the processes of ordination, training and accreditation required in the state churches. As the movements aged, normal processes of institutionalisation become apparent, with accreditation and training mechanisms emerging to support those involved in translocal ministry – such as the Waldensian 'schools' and their mentoring system for new translocal ministers, or the strategic planning of missionary journeys by Hutterite communities in Moravia and their moving commissioning services for missionaries likely to become martyrs. But by comparison with translocal ministry in the state churches, organisation was light and flexible, able to respond to emerging needs and opportunities rather than being locked into rigid structures.

Translocal ministry can be relational. The Christendom understanding (which exacerbated developing pre-Christendom tendencies) of translocal ministry implied a hierarchy of ministry: local church leaders were inferior in stature and authority to

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[4] The Waldensians flourished especially in southern France and northern Italy between the 12th century and the Reformation era and also spread into German-speakers areas, despite sustained persecution. In 14th century England radical followers of John Wyclif were dubbed Lollards and established churches in many parts of the country, some of which survived until the Reformation. Anabaptist communities sprang up in Switzerland, Germany and the Netherlands in the 16th century and offered a more radical approach to reformation than their Protestant contemporaries. For a succinct summary of the history and convictions of these movements, see www.anabaptistnetwork.com. Other chapters in this book explore the relevance to contemporary discussions about translocal ministry of the history of English Baptists.

those with translocal responsibility. Not only were the dissidents' instincts against such hierarchical assumptions, but the terms they used to identify translocal ministers appear to be consciously challenging hierarchical notions. Waldensians commissioned to translocal ministry were called *barbes* – 'uncles' – in contradistinction from Catholic 'fathers', and Lollards employed the relational and non-hierarchical term 'known men' to designate those who travelled between their congregations. The dissidents were suspicious of honorific titles and favoured the simpler familial terminology of 'brothers and sisters' for translocal ministers and local leaders. A relational understanding of church, which respects congregational integrity and values contextual decision-making, need not be threatened by translocal ministry.

Translocal ministry can be mission-oriented. The dissident movements appeared threatening to those who were committed to the Christendom system, because they challenged the centuries-old assumption that Europe was Christian and so needed pastor-administrators in local and translocal ministry roles. Translocal ministry on the margins certainly included pastoral care and coordinating tasks, but it was primarily concerned with missional activities – evangelising communities, calling people to repentance, baptising and catechising new believers, planting churches, deploying missional resources and pioneering initiatives.

Transgressing parochial and diocesan boundaries to the dismay of the state churches' translocal overseers, Waldensians, Lollards and Anabaptists offended the settled clergy and maintenance-oriented churches of Christendom. Justus Menius, for instance, expressed Lutheran irritation at translocal Anabaptist missioners, claiming biblical support for his insistence that 'the Servant of the Gospel does not travel here and there in the land in one church today and another tomorrow, preaching one thing in one and another in the other. But one servant serves with true industry his assigned church and remains with it, leaving other churches to peace and tranquillity. Thereby each church has its own constituted servant and avoids and excludes strange, unlicensed landcombers.'[5]

But, for Anabaptists, the mission imperative (which was regarded as binding on all believers rather than applying only to specialists) took precedence over ecclesiastical sensibilities and produced a different understanding of translocal ministry. Hans Arbeiter, a Hutterian missionary captured in 1568, 'asserted that no earthly magistrate had the right to forbid God's missioners from setting foot on their land, for the earth was the Lord's (Ps. 24:1), and the Lord had called the church to mission.'[6]

Translocal ministry can be pluriform. Within the dissident movements many church members (women and men) were involved in translocal ministry, as individuals or in teams. Nor was there an assumption that ordination was required. Anabaptists often sent out teams of three, with a preacher accompanied by an assistant and by someone else whose main responsibility was liaising with the churches. It is not always easy to differentiate clearly (in the dissident groups or contemporary church life) between those exercising *itinerant* ministry and those exercising *translocal* responsibility. It may be possible to distinguish these, at least in theory, by reference to their level of

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[5] Justus Menius: (Von dem Geist der Widerteuffer, Wittemberg 1544), cited in Franklin Littell: 'The Anabaptist Theology of Mission', in Wilbert Shenk (Ed.): *Anabaptism and Mission* (Scottdale: Herald Press, 1984), p20.
[6] Leonard Gross: 'Sixteenth-Century Hutterian Mission' in Shenk, *Anabaptism*, p111.

influence, continuing involvement or strategic oversight, but this is rather less helpful in practice. Many Lollard tradesmen, Waldensian merchants and Anabaptist artisans evangelised in the course of their daily work as they travelled the roads of Europe. Some devoted more and more time to ministry until their trade was secondary and were as influential among dissident congregations as any bishop in the state churches.

Translocal ministry can be exercised by apostles and prophets. The activities and roles of those involved in translocal ministry on the margins seem closer to New Testament descriptions of apostles and prophets than is apparent with state church models. Nor was there the same reticence about using these terms as in the state churches or, indeed, in many contemporary churches, where such language is assumed to imply enhanced status or authority. Anabaptists designated some of those who travelled between their congregations 'apostles' and recognised the ministry of 'prophets' who also moved among the churches. Their contemporaneous friendly critic, Sebastian Franck wrote about the Anabaptists: 'They wish to imitate apostolic life…moving about from one place to another, preaching and claiming a great calling and mission.' Some were so convinced of their calling, wrote Franck, that they felt 'themselves responsible for the whole world.'[7]

Hans Kasdorf, comparing the Anabaptists with the earlier Celtic missionaries, writes: 'Like the famous Irish *peregrini* almost a thousand years before them…Anabaptist preachers wandered from place to place and proclaimed the gospel. But unlike the *peregrini*, these Anabaptist missionaries baptized new converts, established Christians in their faith and gathered them into local congregations…The Anabaptist churches discerned and systematically sent out many apostles. The designation *apostle* was deliberately chosen for those who were sent out in apostolic teams.'[8]

The term 'apostle' appears also (though not frequently) in Waldensian writings to describe translocal ministers, and their contemporaries too compared Waldensian missionaries to New Testament apostles. Although Lollards did not use this term themselves, Anne Hudson (a leading historian of the Lollard movement) describes their preachers as 'apostles' and 'prophets.'[9] Historians of such movements (and many later missional movements) are often drawn to such terms to describe the phenomena they encounter.

Translocal ministry can easily revert to inherited models. The fluid, missional, relational and multi-faceted expression of translocal ministry we can see at least glimpses of in the early years of these dissident movements was susceptible to co-option back into traditional models of ministry. Pressure of persecution might discourage evangelisation and result in translocal ministry becoming more concerned with survival and maintenance than mission. The growing complexity of developing movements might load increasing administrative and pastoral responsibilities on the shoulders of those with translocal roles. Waldensian and Lollard communities (perhaps because they were too widely scattered for greater organisation) resisted such institutionalisation for many decades, but Anabaptist apostles rather quickly transmuted into Mennonite bishops once the movement began to settle down and a maintenance-oriented role superseded the earlier missional focus.

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[7] Cited in Hans Kasdorf: 'The Anabaptist Approach to Mission' in Shenk, *Anabaptism*, p64
[8] Kasdorf: 'The Anabaptist Approach to Mission' in Shenk, *Anabaptism*, p59.
[9] Anne Hudson: *The Premature Reformation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), p449.

Translocal ministry after Christendom

The emerging culture of post-Christendom in western society[10] is very different from the Christendom context within which traditional models of translocal ministry have been developed and marginal alternatives periodically flourished. Drawing on the experience of this era but refusing to be unduly restricted by it, what are the issues we should consider as we reflect on the development and renewal of models of translocal ministry today?

Mission-orientation

The most fundamental and pressing issue facing Christians in all traditions is the need for a decisive and thorough paradigm shift from the inherited maintenance-orientation that has shaped our churches to a mission-orientation that will enable us to recalibrate our structures and refine our strategies for a different world. No attempts to reorganise or re-brand translocal ministry will effect more than cosmetic changes unless this shift takes place. This mission-orientation does not denigrate vital maintenance activities or naively oppose 'mission' and 'maintenance', but it insists that maintenance fits within a mission framework, rather than vice versa. If those who exercise translocal ministry are burdened with maintenance-oriented responsibilities and expectations, they will be no more able than most of their predecessors to function as mission strategists.

Like other social organisations, denominations usually begin as movements around a shared vision and gradually develop into institutions. A popular description of this seemingly inevitable process – man, movement, machine, monument, mausoleum – uses non-inclusive language for the sake of alliteration but has a familiar feel for students of church history. But the normality and seeming inevitability of this process (regarded by some as maturing, by others as degeneration) does not preclude the possibility of re-imagining a denomination as a movement rather than an institution. Studies of organisational development have discovered models and processes whereby institutions can be revitalised rather than continuing along the anticipated path towards institutionalisation.

In a postmodern and post-Christendom context, in which institutions are culturally suspect and the marginalisation of the churches and discursive Christianity requires a radically different mindset and structure than was appropriate in an earlier era, such revitalisation is crucial. How could this be accomplished? We might ask what our churches would look like if they perceived themselves as participating in a movement rather than an institution. Or how would a denomination change were it to function as a truly missional movement?

Changing our terminology will certainly not, by itself, achieve this. The language of 'missionary congregations' or 'missional church' has become familiar over recent years and has impacted how denominations and congregations operate, but familiarity with this language can lull us into a false sense of security, imagining that talking in missional terms equates to developing a missionary movement. What is required is an

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[10] For a detailed study, see Stuart Murray: *Post-Christendom* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2004).

exercise of corporate imagination that has very practical outcomes that can be costed and subject to ongoing monitoring. Nothing less than a radical shift from institutional mode to a movement for mission will suffice in post-Christendom. Translocal forms of ministry have a vital role to play in this imaginative and practical paradigm shift, for this cannot be accomplished at local level alone. But only mission-oriented forms of translocal ministry will be able to make this contribution.

Re-training

All of which suggests that those moving into translocal ministry need not only a process of induction and instruction about institutional issues and working practices in their new roles, but re-training. If men and women commissioned to local forms of ministry are deemed to require training and formation to enhance and reflect on their (often substantial) prior experience of congregational leadership, preaching, pastoral ministry and mission, surely those who move from this local sphere into translocal ministry need such training. Not only has the cultural context within which they were trained for local ministry changed dramatically over the intervening years, so that a refresher course might be useful; but new theological, missiological and pastoral perspectives that have informed the training of new local ministers (to whom they will have responsibilities and with whom they will soon be working) should also be on any re-training agenda. Post-Christendom requires a whole-heartedly missional approach and fresh thinking on a wide range of issues, for which many of those moving into translocal roles were not prepared by their initial training for ministry in institutions and contexts still deeply immersed in Christendom ways of thinking.

Furthermore, in their new translocal ministry many will encounter different issues and require new skills that were not part of their previous local experience. Some will now be working as members or leaders of staff teams, rather than guiding and coordinating the work of volunteers. Their priorities and the tasks that will occupy the majority of their time will be quite different from those with which they were familiar as local ministers. Strategic thinking, mentoring colleagues and local leaders, grappling with disciplinary issues and many other responsibilities require time for equipping and reflection.

Inadequate preparation of translocal ministers can result in disorientation, confusion, overwork, ill-health and unwise intervention in local contexts. Translocal ministers can do much harm as well as a great deal of good. My personal experience of those exercising translocal ministries has been very mixed. Some translocal ministers have been excellent, but on the whole I have been disappointed by the quality of translocal ministry I have encountered, and frankly some have been incompetent and operating in roles for which they were not gifted or for which they had not been equipped. Effective and sustainable translocal ministry requires an investment in induction training and the provision of ongoing opportunities for skills training, peer mentoring, supervision and theological reflection.

Partnership

One of the lessons emerging from the experience of church planting since the early 1990s has been the importance of partnership between local and translocal leaders in developing mission strategies. Denominations that have relied on local entrepreneurial

leadership to initiate church planting have discovered that this will founder without translocal direction and support; it will also result in churches being planted in less strategic contexts. Denominations that have attempted to initiate all church planting centrally or regionally have not been able to galvanise local action effectively.[11]

What is true of church planting is probably equally true of other aspects of mission and ministry. Neither independently-minded congregations that eschew the wider perspective of translocal ministry nor models of translocal ministry that attempt to impose strategies or marginalise local congregational discernment and vision will do. Partnership in a non-hierarchical structure that recognises different spheres (rather than levels) of ministry and is rooted in friendship and mutual respect offers better prospects for developing and sustaining the missionary movement needed. It seems likely that many congregations will require as much retraining as those moving into translocal ministry if this kind of partnership is to reach its full potential. A clear and coherent understanding of the potential and purpose of translocal ministry is needed at local church level. In order to facilitate this re-education of local congregations, training for local ministry should also incorporate an understanding of the scope and contribution of translocal ministry.

Accountability

One important aspect of partnership, to which more attention may need to be given, is the accountability of translocal ministers – not just to their regional association or the denominational council, but to the local congregation of which they are members or from which they were commissioned to their translocal role. It seems from the New Testament writings that those involved in translocal ministry reported back regularly to their commissioning congregation, as well as conferring with others involved in translocal ministry. Paul certainly consulted with the Jerusalem apostles (Galatians 1:18-2:10), but he and Barnabas spent considerable time reporting to the church in Antioch from where they had been commissioned (Acts 14:26-28).

Missionaries in other cultures regularly return to their home churches for periods of rest, reflection and renewal, where they report on their activities and (at least in some cases) draw on the insights of their home congregation as they discuss issues they are facing. There are indications that Anabaptist apostles and Baptist messengers were accountable to their commissioning congregations in ways that those involved in translocal ministry today might also find beneficial. Such periods of reflection and consultation might further erode any hierarchical dimension of translocal ministry; it would hopefully also help to ensure that those involved in translocal ministry are less isolated than at present and less likely to suffer from burnout; and it would encourage them not to lose touch with grassroots congregational life in a way that can happen if their involvement in local churches is primarily as a visiting preacher or pastoral fire-fighter.

Trans-denominational ministry

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[11] See further George Lings & Stuart Murray: *Church Planting: Past, Present and Future* (Cambridge: Grove Books, 2003), pp17-19.

If translocal ministry is to thrive in the post-denominational era that is emerging from the demise of Christendom, it will need to operate in a creatively and generously trans-denominational way. This is not the same as the development of ecumenical relationships and the signing of formal covenants between those with translocal responsibilities in different denominations. These honourable and helpful arrangements were aspects of the institutional kind of ecumenism that is fast giving way to grass-roots post-denominational networking in an era when relationships, exchange of ideas and resources and seizing opportunities will seem much more relevant than debating issues of 'faith and order' or forming representative and carefully balanced ecumenical committees.

In post-Christendom a messier and more mission-oriented ecumenical networking will be the order of the day. Territorial and denominational defence-mechanisms are anachronistic and rather silly when the churches are all on the cultural and spiritual margins. The primary emphasis will need to be on the challenges and opportunities for mission in a society where networks are as strategic as neighbourhoods and where co-operation will be vital for survival and any attempt at mission effectiveness. The old structures and sensitivities will have to give way to a new level of trust, mutual recognition of ministry and partnership. Appointing to translocal roles those unable or unwilling to adapt to and flourish in this broader and less circumscribed environment will not be wise. Networking skills will be much more valuable than understanding of institutional processes.

Appointment and terminology

A practical implication of all this is that the expectations, job-descriptions, skills and priorities of those called into translocal ministry need a thorough overhaul. Putting this fairly bluntly, denominations need to appoint people with pioneering and strategic gifts rather than administrative skills or successful local ministries, people who are mission-minded, oriented towards envisioning, change-management and risk-taking rather than supervising stability or managing decline. Having 'a safe pair of hands' or 'knowing the right people' will not be sufficient!

One term for the kind of role we are envisaging is 'apostolic.' Reflecting on models of church and mission in a changing world, Eddie Gibbs insists: 'the church needs to move from the Constantinian model – which presumed a churched culture – to an apostolic model designed to penetrate the vast, unchurched segments of society.'[12] This 'apostolic model' implies changes in the ways congregations operate, but the catalyst for such local changes may be 'apostolic' forms of translocal ministry.

This does not mean that all translocal ministers should be gifted as apostles, or that this terminology should necessarily be used to describe those who are. The question of terminology may be significant. It is worth asking whether the use of 'apostolic' terminology will help or hinder churches from embracing and benefiting from translocal ministry. If the term worries, confuses or offends local ministers and their churches, is it worth persisting with? On the other hand, if employing a generic term like 'translocal' locks churches into maintenance-oriented models and fails to help them engage with missional challenges or strategic and visionary leadership, maybe

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[12] Eddie Gibbs: *Church Next* (Leicester: IVP, 2001).

the term 'apostolic' will be vital to signal the changes of priority and ethos that are essential in a post-Christendom era.

Whether the term 'apostolic' is used or not, collapsing all expressions of 'translocal ministry' into 'apostolic ministry' will not be helpful: translocal pastors and teachers, administrators and evangelists can also play important roles. Indeed, the pastoral and organisational abilities that have traditionally been sought in translocal ministers will still be needed by those exercising 'apostolic' roles, but these abilities will need to be deployed in new ways and with different priorities in a mission context. A successful track record in successful suburban churches may be an inadequate, even unhelpful, qualification or preparation for those called to exercise a translocal missional ministry in the urban, postmodern and multicultural contexts that represent the main challenges facing the churches in post-Christendom.

But, if this is the case for translocal ministry in post-Christendom, there may also be implications for local ministry. Suitable candidates for translocal ministry are likely to be found primarily among those already experienced in local ministry, so what has been suggested regarding the appointment, skills and training of translocal ministers needs also to impact the appointment, skills and training of local ministers. Anne Wilkinson-Hayes questions whether ordination to a ministry of 'word and sacrament' is an accurate understanding of what translocal ministers are called to do. Perhaps we need to question whether this hallowed definition is any longer appropriate or helpful even for local ministers. The maintenance orientation that it can (though perhaps need not) carry may not encourage ministers to prioritise wisely the multiple challenges facing the churches in today's mission environment. Maybe reflection on the nature of translocal ministry will stimulate renewed thinking about the calling of local ministers and how the churches might perceive their role.

These last reflections may seem to have strayed beyond the subject of this article, but it seems that reflection on any aspect of ecclesiology can disrupt accepted notions and priorities in other areas of church life. The fourth-century shift from pre-Christendom to Christendom deeply impacted many areas of church life, but the changes were felt first among translocal ministers. Perhaps the further shift from Christendom to post-Christendom, which will provoke profound changes in twenty-first century churches, will also be discerned as clearly as anywhere else in the sphere of translocal ministry. And perhaps a renewed expression of translocal ministry will be one of the critical factors in equipping the churches to engage effectively with this strange new world.