

Lutherstadt, Wittenberg 15 – 17 April 2016 Re-imagining Protestantism

How can we as Protestants reform the church for Mission?

Practical examples from the United Reformed Church, England.

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In Britain and other countries of Europe and also in North America mainline Protestant churches are re-thinking their ministry and mission in light of changing social and cultural context since the Enlightenment, scientific scepticism – ‘new Atheists’, doubts after two world wars, secularism in the social and political spheres, globalisation, multi-faith and pluralist cultures and the threat of terrorism and tensions between Extremists in Muslim and Western so called Christian world, and technological advances in social media.

Recently I was asked to speak at a Sceptics-In-the-Pub event in Cambridge. It was a challenge – as a friend of mine who was a former parishioner and who is a scientist at the Genome Centre near Cambridge said, the students and lecturers there are intelligent, knowledgeable and opinionated! They graciously listened to my talk for 45 minutes, but then we had a rather lively discussion... I realised that there was a huge gulf between my Christian perspective and their sceptic, atheist perspectives. Yes this is partly due to changes in society, but it is also to do with the historical baggage that we Western Christians carry. E.G. The experience of judgementalism that people my generation and older in church life when they were younger. The consequence is that church is still seen as restrictive and telling people what they should not do. Whatever the reasons, the secularisation of our society has continued over the past century. British You Gov poll Dec 2015 suggests that 31% identify themselves as Christian or Church of England, but only 7% attend church on a weekly basis, and most of them are well into middle age.

When I took a course in missiology back in the 80s I remember a tutor saying that they believed that a country should be considered a mission field if there were less than 10% of its people went to church. When Lesslie Newbigin returned to Britain after being a missionary in India, he found Britain to be a far more challenging mission field than India. So how can we reform our churches for mission to relate to people outside our churches, particularly the

younger generations? In my denomination the average age is 70 – that means that unless we reach out to younger generations our church will be gone within 20 - 30 years.

There are some who are setting up new projects, Fresh Expressions of church and exciting new ventures to start new worshipping congregations and we have some speakers talking about them Nadine van Hierden, Michael Moynagh. We will hear from them later.

As a local minister of the United Reformed Church in mainland Britain, I believe that we still have sufficient openness to change and the Spirit's leading and people resources in our current churches to reform ourselves to be witnesses to God's love and grace in our own society. We can start to do this by renewing our theology, our soteriology, our missiology and our ecclesiology.

Theology – God is three-in-one – the source of life and love. God is a community of love, who created human beings in community: in families and tribes. In contrast to our competitive consumer society Christians believe that humans are created in God's image to relate to God and to each other, to care for each other not just to look out for ourselves.

Soteriology - God created the world to bring life and love. God loves the world. Many Psalms speak of God's steadfast love enduring forever. It was because he loved the world, not because he was angry with it, that he sent Jesus into the world to save it. John 3.16 If we read on in verse 17: God did not send his son into the world to condemn the world but that the world through him might be saved. A renewed understanding of salvation is the restoration not only of people to God, but people to each other, and all of creation. This is the good news. Protestants have tended to focus on an individual's personal sins. A traditional Protestant understanding of the gospel is that people are sinners and that they need to repent, turn to God for forgiveness. But sin is in all structures of society and its effects reach all of creation in decay, destruction and death. Modern people are probably more aware of being sinned against, or sufferings hardships which Christians believe are ultimately the result of sin, than being sinners themselves. A broader understanding of salvation is that it is to bring shalom: healing and wholeness for communities and society as well as individual forgiveness.

Missiology - God is a sending God. God sent Jesus into the world to save it. (Tim Dearborn) said, 'It is not the church of God that has a mission in the world, but the God of Mission who has a church in the world.' Jesus then sent his followers to proclaim of his reign of justice and love. Matthew 28.18: '... in our going and baptizing and teaching to make disciples of all nations.' We are to further Jesus' mission is similar to Jesus' as he states in Luke 4.18 to healing the sick, comfort the bereaved, feed the hungry, and release the oppressed.

Ecclesiology – (J. Andrew Kirk) 'The church is by nature missionary to the extent that if it ceases to be missionary it has not just failed in one of its tasks, it has ceased to be church.' Our churches have in many ways become exclusive clubs. Places where people who are alike meet with each other and support each other over the years. They need to be renewed as mission outposts.

Lesslie Newbigin identifies the local congregation as the hermeneutic of the gospel, God's chosen method of interpretation of the good news of God's love shown in Christ to the world. Amazingly God has chosen the church, as the communities of faith sinners and sinful as we are, to be signs of the kingdom. So a renewed ecclesiology recognises that God's kingdom is not just a set of ideas that are to be grasped, nor mission simply individuals speaking the gospel, but a group of followers just like the community that Jesus brought around him, varied, sinful, doubting, but learners, disciples to live out the gospel.

As sent ones we are to follow Jesus' ministry of bringing healing and peace to people as he proclaimed the nearness of God's realm and renew our congregations as signs of God's coming reign of justice and love. In the United Reformed Church we see the way to do this as churches displaying the Five Marks of Mission.

- 1) Proclaim the good news of the kingdom
- 2) Nurture and teach new believers
- 3) Respond to human need in loving service
- 4) Seek to transform unjust structures of society
- 5) Safeguard creation and sustain and renew the earth

Show video clip

1) Proclaim the good news of Christ's reign in our local church's worship and witness to our community

Protestant churches have tended to be highly individualistic in their understanding of salvation. If an individual believes in Christ then he or she is Christian. Evangelism has focussed on individuals rather than groups and one on one conversations rather than the witness of the Christian community. This results in believing without belonging. (Grace Davie) But it is a false distinction. In the Scriptures all people who come to faith become part of the body of Christ, the church. And it is often as people are associated with a local community of faith or local congregation that they become part of it and grow in grace and knowledge of Christ. My parents are an example – They had a nominal church affiliation: my mother had been baptised as Church of England and my father Presbyterian. As children we were baptised Presbyterian. My parents sent us to church so they could have peace and quiet on a Sunday morning as there were five of us.

As a teen I used to pray that they would become Christians. It was not until I left home to go to university that my Mum started attending as she had come to know some other women in the church, then she acknowledged her faith. My father started attending after he had become very ill with a liver abscess and people from the church had visited him in hospital. He was so touched by their care and concern that he went to church over many years and gradually acknowledged the Christian faith. It takes time and teaching and seeing the faith lived out to draw most people to God. The local congregation is able to do that.

2) Teach, baptise and nurture people in the faith

Preaching is part of worship – it can still be a means of teaching, but it may also need to be interactive to allow questioning and discussion to help growth of knowledge. House groups are very effective as tools of teaching, yet in the local church where I serve people are very wary of Bible studies, afraid that they will be embarrassed by their lack of biblical knowledge. One thing I do instead is once a month have a café style worship where we have an interactive talk instead of a sermon and people are able to discuss the Scripture passage of the day and how it relates to them around tables. We also set up discussion groups with video clips on different themes, current issues in society where people can seek to find a Christian perspective.

3) Provide pastoral care and respond to human need

Protestants have always been good at tending to be caring for our sick and elderly of the church, but we can reach beyond our churches by visiting people in hospital, in nursing homes, by responding to the lonely and grieving.

One means is by providing hospitality – a place where people can come to meet other people and support them in their situations – many churches are now opening up to serve food and drink. We have a café and have found we now have regulars and can talk to them and get to know them and minister to them where appropriate. Eg John Abram, Glynn, Pat & Steve Clarke

4) Working for justice and peace and respond to world crises

Jesus life and ministry showed that in God's kingdom the poor are valued. In the world that is so divided between rich and poor a strong witness to God's love is to care for the poor and to stand up for them. Protestants can join the Fairtrade movement, E.G. Fairtrade shop, Just Sharing. We have recently had many welfare cuts and so more people struggling to make ends meet – set up Foodbanks, through Churches Together – working with other churches we share resources and show our unity.

The other main problem in our world is conflict and warfare and terrorism. We are to be peacemakers – seeking to bring reconciliation of different tribes and by resisting evil and cruelty and speaking out against it, helping those who are victims of war and persecution and encouraging negotiation for peace. This ministry of peacemaking follows Jesus' example of refusing to fight back when he was unjustly tried and executed and his teaching on the Sermon on the Mount. Examples are caring for the migrants fleeing from war in Syria and Africa.

5) Safe guard creation; care for the environment

In the past the church has been guilty of permitting if not supporting the exploitation of the environment. We as Protestants can be renewed as we become aware of our responsibility to recycle, re-use, and reduce our carbon footprints in the environment. Setting up an ecology group is important and linking with A Rocha would enable each local congregation to see ways to care for the environment, to speak out for sustainable use of resources. We can seek better methods of food production and such as Slow Food rather than

intensive farming and use of pesticides. This would enable us to show God's love for the world and his plan to restore all creation.

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