

## Briefing Notes:

# Sharing the Gospel in Post-Modern Contexts



From 7<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> March 2011, CWM Europe held a workshop to consider the theme of "Sharing the gospel in our post-modern contexts." The workshop was an element in the "Faith Sharing in a European Context" programme of CWM Europe. The workshop brought together those involved in developing mission strategies, mission enablers and local practitioners in the CWM Europe member churches.

To help participants prepare for the workshop a series of theme papers were written. These included:

Transforming Worship  
Postmodern Bible  
Postmodernism and Science  
Exploring the European Context  
Mission Shaped Church  
Christians in the Public Space

All these papers are available on the CWM Europe website – [www.cwmeurope.org](http://www.cwmeurope.org)

Each day we used a different method of Bible study to explore the Bible e.g. multi-cultural, colonial, feminist approaches and the daily worship further developed some of the ideas contained in "Transforming Worship."

At the conclusion, Revd Dr Graham Adams led a theological reflection based on the papers, presentations and conversations at the workshop. The theological reflection is also available on the CWM Europe website.

These notes are intended to share the presentations and sessions that are not already available on the CWM Europe website in a fuller format.

In addition to the papers, there are two presentations on the CWM Europe website:

- Mission Shaped Church
- Post-modernism, science, Christian witness and Christian ethics.

*All the information can be found in the "Resources" section of the CWM Europe website under "Sharing the Gospel in our Post-Modern Contexts."*

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**Bible study – Revd Dr John Campbell**  
**(Principal, Northern College, Manchester)**

See also the paper "Postmodern Bible" on [www.cwmeurope.org](http://www.cwmeurope.org)

In "Inter-cultural" bible study, we need to learn how to have conversations that celebrate and hear voices from all our contexts.

The European conversation about multi-culturalism has been problematic but not impossible. Two pictures illustrate some of the difficulties and blocks to multi-culturalism, not least the issues of oppression and Christian mission which was often imperialistic and exported European culture.



"The Secret of England's Greatness" by Thomas Jones Barker shows a young Queen Victoria handing a Bible to an inhabitant of the colonies, watched over by Prince Albert and officials. The second picture illustrates an act of worship in a slave colony, with the white slave owner having a position of power whilst the slaves are powerless. It is also apparent in both pictures the way in which the Bible was used as a justification for Empire, slavery and the oppression of others.

Ruth Frankenberg speaks of the "social construction of whiteness," which can be experienced in three categories:

Essentialist – white superiority and others service

Evasive – "we don't see colour" this is evasive of issues of power

Engaging – anti-racist and understands "race" to be a social construction

Race-based injustice is a real experience for many people. While not seeing colour does sound far, not seeing power is hugely unfair. "Culture" is sustained by social and political salience.

Noel Ignatiev "How the Irish became white."

Rules for being the white British mind when trying to approach the Bible:

- Cannot be trusted in our own
- Requires help to sort out the inherent baggage
- Need help to recover the biblical contexts
- Need help to hear hidden and public voices
- Must resist the urge to domesticate

- Remember the 'plank' of privilege
- Must learn to read as traitors of that privilege

Jesus used his privilege as a male, Jew, religious teacher to side with those who were excluded and to include them.

**Acts 6:1-7** tells of the awkward beginning of a multi-cultural church.

Acts 8:1 tells of the persecution that affected the Christian community and scattered the believers, except for the apostles. It is suggested that this persecution and diaspora mostly affected the Gentile Christians.

Acts 6:5 gives a list of all those chosen to distribute charity to the Gentile believers who had complained about being missed out in the distribution. Why are all the names listed Greek names? And why in Acts 6:1 do the Greek widows get left out of the charitable distribution in the first place?

It is suggested that they are excluded because of Jewish purity laws. Perhaps the Jewish Christians felt unable to include the Greek Christians when sharing and worshipping together. Maybe the inclusion of the Greek Christians was too challenging for the rest of the church, especially those who were careful to preserve their 'Jewishness.'

Consider:

a) What sorts of people, with what cultural influences and experiences would you more likely to find in:

- An Aramaic- speaking Jewish Christian fellowship in Jerusalem
- A Greek-speaking Jewish Christian fellowship in Jerusalem

b) Why might including non-Jewish God fearers in fellowship meals seem either important or impossible in these two diverging cultural groups?

- An Aramaic- speaking Jewish Christian fellowship in Jerusalem
- A Greek-speaking Jewish Christian fellowship in Jerusalem

It is suggested that Acts 8:1-7 is a public re-telling of the account by 'Luke' who wants the Christian community to be more inclusive.

The Aramaic congregation wants to attract more Aramaic God-fearing people, but who will keep purity laws. The Greek speaking congregation want the church to be for all people.

Who let us in both on this story and in the missionary expansion to all nations?

- 'Luke' is the evangelist of expansion and inclusion
- Stephen the genius of re-orientation
- The risk taking Greek speaking Jewish Christians who were willing to share bread and wine
- The Holy Spirit

## **Exploring the contexts – Francis Brienen** **(Mission Secretary for the URC)**

See also "Exploring the Contexts" on [www.cwmeurope.org](http://www.cwmeurope.org)

The 2004 Mission Shaped Church Report highlighted certain social trends – housing, employment, mobility, social/leisure – as having a fragmenting affect on society/community.

Three ways in which society has changed:

- **A Network Society**

"Flow" is now more important than "place" for many people. Greater mobility, freedom of choice, gaps around shared interests. However, it is possible to overstate the case for the "network" society, as large sections are still firmly rooted to a specific geographical place.

- **A Consumer Society**

Consumer choice, to which "personalisation" is central, consumerism is a factor when considering and valuing faith claims.

- **Post-Christendom Society**

The move towards a network and consumer society coincided with the demise of "Christendom." Generation Y are the first generation to not have any latent spirituality which is ready to be awakened.

- **Post-Modern Society**

The word is defined by its "hyphen," it is more a mindset after modernism. Not a coherent philosophy of its own but rather an intellectual kaleidoscope.

John Finney says that church is "a bird with unequal wings," having one which is modern and another post-modern. Michael Moynagh suggested we are modern and post-modern depending on the context in which we find ourselves.

Churches cannot escape these social changes. So how are churches responding to this challenge?

### **Vicarious Church**

Grace Davey used the term "believing without belonging" to describe how people still believe and have some expression of Christian faith, but this does not necessarily mean any church or religious affiliation. We have experienced little decline in religious feeling but there has been significant decline in church.

Church no longer provides a religious canopy for all people, at the same time churches have been developing as social voluntary organisations.

The church now has a "vicarious" role enacting the religious memory on behalf of the population. People draw on that religious memory at significant life moments, but for the majority of time people continue as if the church was merely part of the landscape.

2010 84% of the English population visited a place of worship during the year.

## **Mission Shaped Church**

There is growing evidence of renewed mission awareness within the church e.g. Fresh Expressions, new ways of being church, relational ways of engaging in evangelism.

In the autumn of 2010 the Roman Catholic Church, Church of England and the Baptist church all reported that the "decline had bottomed out."

The Mission Shaped Church Report put forward the following breakdown:

26% church goes in some form  
9% other (other religion)  
6% open to invitation  
59% closed to invitation

## **Methods of Outreach**

- Attraction methods e.g. Back to Church Sunday
- Engaged method e.g. Hope Together
- Emerging method e.g. Fresh Expression

The challenge is not to engage people "where" they are but "how" they are.

People find their way into the Christian story in many different ways. When John Finney researched how people found their way into the Christian faith he discovered:

14% an experience of God's love  
13% interest in the Bible  
8% exploring life after death  
5% Jesus stories  
13% experience of forgiveness  
8% found meaning in the cross

When asked if they had any sense of "guilt" or "sin," 61% said they had no awareness of guilt or sin.

Need to review our methods but also the message. The question "what is the good news" needs answering afresh in each context.

## **Key comments/responses**

- a) The shift we experience from institutional church that had "power" to a place where it is no longer important or central to majority of people. The paradigm shift towards people and community, away from a central position.
- b) Moving towards the relational is not something to preach about but something to share. The church is to invite people to come on a spiritual journey of discovery – more a travel companion than a travel guide.

- c) Good news changes according to the context. All good news stems from a sense of self-worth, value etc which leads back to Christ. In tragedy the good news is not something to say but to speak by presence.
- d) The changes in context have not been sudden but over a long period of time. The church now experiences a multi-generational context for mission.
- e) There is a need to make connections with people who don't have any connection to the church. People who live in rural settings and experience isolation. The church is called to communicate in a language that people understand.



**Media and Culture – Andrew Graystone**  
**(Director of Church and Media Network)**

We are currently in the middle of a digital revolution. For £60k you can buy a computer that is shaped like a hand that is able to screw in a light bulb.

The time taken for each technological advance to reach 50 million users:

Radio – 30 years

TV – 13 years

PC – 3 years

Soni play station – 3 days

We keep up with the digital progress not by developing our understanding but by breeding. Our children are better equipped to use much of the technology.

On average we watch 2 hours 40 minutes of TV per day.

50% children under 2 years old watch 3 hours of TV per day.

79% children have a TV in their bedroom

85% children have access to the internet

56% children have their own profile page

8.4 million people in the UK are on Facebook

If Facebook were a country it would be the third most populated in the world.

### **Gaming**

There are currently 22 million games consoles in the UK.

1 in 3 households bought a games console in 2010. The gaming industry is worth more than the music and film industry combined.

Just because something can be used for evil purposes doesn't mean to say that it cannot be used for good. You cannot change a culture until you recognise how much you've been changed by a culture.

### **Key features in a digital environment:**

Mobility (1990 there were 30 TV channels in 2010 there were 298 TV channels)

Convergence (gadgets that do more jobs, ideas/culture converging)

Personalisation

Participation

Commercialisation

### **Issues to consider**

- Singularity of personality – to be one person both on-line and off-line. Someone can be known by many different names but should be one whole person, complete and consistent.
- Humanise digital relationships – there is a need to humanise relationships between the people who create and who consume. Each has a responsibility to the other.



- Conscientisation – the need to understand the power dynamics at work in relationships and sharing information. To educate people to take control of their on-line personality/identity.
- Authority and openness
- Digital justice – in being treated first of all as consumers, we need to argue for a preferential treatment of the poor.
- Mission and service – who is my neighbour?
- Priority of embodiment – people who we meet in the flesh need to be our real daily community

**Story “Amsterdam Ijburg”  
– Revd Rob Visser**

The setting is north Amsterdam with 15,000 young professionals, there is a high birth rate and so many young children and families.

Rob started walking the streets, talking to people, meeting with local leaders and the media. In October – December he met people and asked for their help in establishing a new project.

January 2011 the group started using a new building with 12 people forming a new church council. Rob uses Twitter to keep in contact and has 200 followers.

The group’s image of the church is of a candle giving light, but the destination is to burn down, alternatively the church as the cement in society.

**Story “Vleuterweide” Utrecht  
- Ria Kaiser**

Play, creative and believe. The area has 60,000 people in a new city which is only 5 years old. It is a wealthy area where mostly over 50’s can afford to live there.

The project focuses on children offering learning and educational programmes.

The project is based in a community centre where all agree to share learning. Projects include literacy, work with the disabled, welfare projects etc

**Threads/Reporting back**

- No “one” formula is going to work. The church needs to be realised from believing “one size fits all.”
- Mixed economy of church.
- Mission as exploration as opposed to having all the answers.
- The “way” we express church is what people reject.
- Empowered by but not afraid of failure.
- Not anxious about the form but let the Spirit lead.
- “Mission is the mother of theology,” we do theology backwards.
- Practical theology because it is in mission that theology lives.