

Briefing Paper – Shaping the church in post-modern times

The View from the Margins

The situation in which the Church finds itself today has changed remarkably, from holding a position of influence to increasing irrelevance. Improving standards of living, science and technological advances and decline in Church attendance should have logically led to the disappearance of religious belief in society. Yet the opposite appears to be true with a growing interest in spirituality and faith. Former UK Prime Minister Tony Blair, was right when he said:

“We enjoy a thousand material advantages over any previous generation, and yet we suffer a depth of insecurity and spiritual doubt they never knew.”

The growing popularity of alternative therapies, complimentary healing and treatments, the focus of popular media on issues related to “body, mind and spirit,” merchandise related to well-being, peace and much sought after tranquillity fills many shop shelves. This booming industry is an indicator of a social restlessness and dissatisfaction with the way things are, pointing to people who search for deeper significance and meaning to life. But this renewed interest in spirituality has not resulted in people returning to Christianity or Church. Our post-modern societies continue to reject absolutes in every form, and individual DIY spiritualities dominate. It is fashionable to collect spiritual insights from a range of traditions. What is right and wrong, real and true is determined by intuition and experience, resulting in people exploring and experimenting with a wide range of beliefs and practices.

This cultural trend is seen more clearly in the under 40’s, older people are more likely to have vaguely Christian opinions or to consider themselves religious, the younger people are, the more likely they are to have a DIY approach to spirituality.

In the book "Beyond The Fringe: Researching a Spiritual Age"¹ there are a series of interviews that demonstrates how virtually everyone has big questions about life. People are interested in destiny and life after death. They are intrigued by the supernatural and whether a relationship with 'God' is possible and/or desirable. Many people question why so many people experience suffering which proves to be a major stumbling block to them in finding or expressing faith.

While it is true that some people are active seekers, the vast majority of people are more influenced by an enquiring and open culture which leaves them open to the possibility of exploring faith and spirituality.

Despite the renewed interest in faith and spirituality, Church is not viewed as a place to explore answers to these questions. While society looks for meaning, belonging, the church is seen as irrelevant, intolerant, with fixed and rigid structures. For many people, Christianity and religion is a contributor to the world's conflicts and problems.

"Fluidity" is a word that characterises the way many people handle religion, shopping in the religious marketplace, for those insights which work for themselves. Religion is approached pragmatically rather than intellectually: Does it work? Does it help me? Does it feel good? Does it touch my life?

How does the Church cope with the experience of being marginal to people's lives? What can local congregations do to re-connect with people and how the Church occupies a space in the religious marketplace where it is taken seriously?

Personal Religious Bonding²

In 2006 the Scientific Council for the Policy of the Dutch Government published the study: "Faith (or more accurately translated "beliefs" or "convictions") in the public domain. Studies of a double transformation." The third chapter of the study was called 'The religious transformation and the social cohesion' and is

¹ "Beyond the Fringe: Researching a Spiritual Age," Nick Spencer, published by Cliff College Publishing, 2005.

² "Beliefs in the public domain: Studies of a Double Transformation." 2006 by The Scientific Council for the Policy of the Dutch Government. The complete study is available at www.wrr.nl

written by Gerrit Kronjee. The chapter contains the following three tables which demonstrate the changes which have taken place in British and Dutch society in relation to people's awareness of religion and the role religion plays in their lives.

	Considers oneself a religious person		Values religion as very important in life		Experience consolation and strength from religion		Finds God to be important to one's personal life		Prays one or more times a week (apart from religious gatherings)	
	1990	2000	1990	2000	1990	2000	1990	2000	1990	2000
UK	56	42	16	13	45	37	36	34	43	24
Netherlands	61	62	19	17	45	43	33	36	46	29

Religious and rituals in private life

	Religious service after birth is important		Religious service for the wedding is important		Religious service after death is important	
	1990	2000	1990	2000	1990	2000
UK	66	59	80	69	86	79
Netherlands	48	40	52	46	62	56

Institutional bonding

	Belongs to a religious or church institution		Attends religious gatherings		Is actively involved in voluntary work in religious or church organisations	
	1990	2000	1990	2000	1990	2000
UK	16	5	24	19	6	6
Netherlands	33	35	20	25	10	11

Another traumatic experience that has affected public opinion about the Church are the child abuse scandals, how the institutional Church has managed this situation and how this has been reported in the media. During the 1960-70's when people left the Church they expressed explicitly negative feelings and described their leaving as a kind of personal liberation. The situation in the 1980's-90's changed dramatically with younger generations being indifferent to Church, allowing it to have "the benefit of the doubt."

In the Netherlands over recent years the Church's contribution towards social cohesion has been viewed positively. But this has changed in recent months and the church is viewed more negatively as a result direct result of the child abuse scandal.

In her book "Beyond the Dark Night: A Way Forward for the Church," Mary Grey suggests that the current moment is crucial for the future of the Church.

"Could this be a *kairos* moment to re-root ourselves in a more profound theological vision and praxis for Christian community, and to rediscover this from the position of marginality?"³

It is difficult to say with any great certainty what the future shape of the Church may become, but there is enough work, experimentation, research and reflection for us to identify a few areas for consideration.

Some of the current learning is based around reflection on the "fresh expressions" movement. The term "Fresh Expression" was coined in the "Mission Shaped Church" report⁴ as a way of describing new congregations or churches specifically designed to reach a specific group or context. Consequently, these "fresh expressions" of church can look very different to the church with which we are most familiar, e.g. a youth skate church, surfer church, bread making church, cafe church etc. The emphasis is clearly on identifying an appropriate expression of church for a specific place or people, this is a very different emphasis from the historic or emerged model(s) of local congregation. "Fresh expressions" forms an important "laboratory" for mission thinking and although it is still a fledging movement, it is increasingly significant and influential for mission reflection and practice. The "hints" suggested below reflect some of the observations emerging from the work done in fresh expressions of Church.

³ "Beyond the Dark Night: A Way Forward for the Church?" Mary Grey, London: Casell, 1997

⁴ "Mission Shaped Church Report" The Archbishops Council 2004 Church of England.

Hints of a New Shape of Church

Local and authentic

A key feature of the future shape of the church will be its being rooted in local communities or focused on specific people/interest groups, though not necessarily geographical community. For example, it may be a network church centred on an activity or interest that meets occasionally for worship, discussion and reflection. There needs to be an accompanying acknowledgement that for that specific group of people this new local faith community is a valid expression of Church.

Clearly there is a place for local congregation that offers a range of activities and opportunities throughout the week. But increasingly people's engagement with these local congregation's will be for specific activities that are relevant or attractive to them, for example with a midweek house group, Sunday morning etc, the Church will need to appreciate that this is an appropriate expression of being part of the Church. This is in contrast to the expectation that people will expression their Church commitment through church membership and attendance at a range of different activities throughout the week.

The local congregation will be less important as an institution as people look for a church that nurtures personal discipleship and development. Local congregations need to walk alongside people in making the connections between their Christian discipleship, working in an office, factory school etc, home, pub and gym etc. The old separation between sacred and secular needs to be rejected as this leaves people leading compartmentalised lives with a disconnection between faith and everyday life. The Church needs to develop a more organic unity of faith, work, rest and play.

Communities that follow and focus on Jesus as an icon of whole living/well being and recognise faithfulness/spirituality has more to do with following Jesus than organisational membership, will provide spaces where they can travel with others who find themselves attracted to these values.

"Missio Dei" Core Values

The Church needs to have a clearer sense of its purpose and *raison d'être*. A survey of the Bible quickly shows that the overarching Biblical story is of a missionary God who is committed to living in relationship with humanity. From the beginning of the Bible with the first people walking with God in the "cool of the day" to the close of Revelation with a renewed and transformed creation, we read of a God who sends messengers, prophets, leaders and ultimately Jesus in order to forge and renew relationships between God and humanity. This message of reconciliation is entrusted to the followers of Jesus and forms the "mission dei" – the very reason for the existence of the church (John 20:21).

David Bosch in his seminal work "Transforming Mission," says:

"The classical doctrine of the *missio dei* (God's mission) as God the Father sending the Son, and God the Father and the Son sending the Spirit was expanded to include yet another "movement": Father, Son and Holy Spirit sending the church into the world."⁵

Often you can have the feeling that the Church is about anything but mission, instead being about ministers, buildings, raising money, meetings etc. Whilst these things may have value in themselves, it is necessary to look at the current structures, activities and practices of the church and ask "how is this working for God's missionary purposes?" This critical question needs to contribute towards changing the emphasis and ethos of the Church so that it is more mission focused.

While we will discuss the issue of "believing and belonging" to Church in terms of Church structure in more detail below, it is relevant to mention the diversity of ways in which people engage and belong to church at this point. Patterns of attendance and participation have changed enormously so that people attend mid-week activities, worship and house groups, etc and increasingly view this as valid participation in Church, separate from attendance on Sunday. The fluidity with which people relate to Church is only likely to increase and so as

⁵ "Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission, Orbis Publishing, 1992.

participation becomes more diverse churches need to give greater attention to what are the Church's core values and the impact these new ways of participation have on community life.

Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch in "The Shaping of Things to Come," suggest that such an emphasis on core values needs to include relationships with Jesus, the Christian story, mission purposes and principles. They suggest that restoring Jesus as the Church's focal point includes:

- "Paying attention to Jesus' human life – his relationships, radical teaching and exemplary lifestyle, - and the implications for discipleship.
- Recognising that the significance of Jesus' death and resurrection cannot be detached from his life: not only asking 'why did Jesus die?' but also 'why did they kill him?'
- Indwelling the Gospel narratives in ways that shape our priorities, stir our imaginations and train our reflexes.
- Reading scripture from a Jesus-centred perspective, regarding his life as the focal point of God's self-revelation.
- Refusing to allow systems of interpretation or texts read without reference to Jesus to muffle his call to discipleship.
- Recovering the emphasis in pre-Christendom and the dissident movements on following Jesus, rather than only worshipping him."⁶

Incarnational

The separation of sacred and secular within the Christian Church mindset has been extremely unhelpful ensuring that Christian engagement in the public square has been marginal. A renewed emphasis on the *missio dei* in recent years has brought about a rediscovery of the importance of being truly incarnational. Christians need to affirm that the world belongs to God and consequently there are no no-go areas for God and that even in the most inhospitable environment God is at work.

⁶ "The Shaping of Things to Come," Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, Hendrikson Publishers, 2003.

The mission shaped Church needs to develop incarnational credentials establishing its integrity in a particular place. An emphasis on being incarnational will mean that there is great diversity in the ways a local congregation will worship, organise itself, engage in mission etc because the group, community, location in which each local congregation is working has different needs and each in turn shape the other.

Inclusivity and welcome

The words "All Welcome," feature amongst a whole lot of other information on many church notice boards, they words imply a commitment to all sections of the community and an aspiration to be welcoming. Whilst these are admirable intentions, the experience can often be different, congregations are often homogeneous in age, culture, class, and they find it difficult to engage with the diverse community beyond. Whilst "all may be welcome," conformity to the Church's inherited culture, patterns of worship and organisation is required if they want to belong.

It is equally as unrealistic to expect the inherited Church to embrace all cultures in a given community as it is to ask those who are culturally distant from Church to jump the gulf. The Fresh Expressions initiative has shown that the starting point for a church shaped by mission is to incarnate the gospel in a specific the culture, group or location. The community that emerges will look much more like the culture, group or location in which it is set and be a different expression of homogeneity with a distinctive contribution to make to its local community.

Welcoming others into our community and creating a space that is inclusive are two very different things. Being inclusive can be both liberating and threatening, Jesus gives many examples in his own life of what being inclusive means both in terms of the cost to himself and the impact such inclusivity had on others e.g. the story of Zacchaeus (Luke 19); the Samaritan woman (John 4). A mission shaped Church will need to take seriously the barriers that are raised to including those who are perceived negatively or as somehow different to the dominant group. Our cultures demand authenticity and the mission shaped Church will have to consider what it means to "welcome all" when there

are significant cultural, theological, class and social barriers to welcoming and inclusion.⁷

Believing and Belonging

We have already noted that the Church is increasingly marginal to society and most people's experience, the fluid way people manage their spirituality – if at all – makes Church further removed from people's experience. These factors along with a general lack of enthusiasm for long-term commitments in society mean that the way Churches organise 'membership' as an expression of belonging is problematic. The mechanics of membership create situations where some people are 'in' and others are 'out;' the experience of membership doesn't correspond to levels of commitment and is an utterly institution way of demonstrating belonging. Counting membership based on Sunday numerical attendance, does not give a complete picture of a local congregations impact on its community nor value those who have chosen to belong to a local church in different ways.

Membership structures, high expectations of members and institutional language can contradict a core value of church in terms of participation in Christian community, belonging to the Church should be about maintaining relationships rather than membership lists.

An example of how far removed the experience of church can be from being inclusive is illustrated in the experience of a friend who saw some young people come to faith at a church summer camp. When he told elders back home he expected expressions of joy but was they told him; "That is all well and good but will they pay their membership fees."

A mission shaped Church will need to develop and value the variety of ways in which people express their commitment. But fundamentally the church needs to consider if commitment to the church institution is the same as commitment to Christ, when these commitments converge and when they are divergent.

⁷ See "Radical Welcome: Embracing God, the Other and the Spirit of Transformation," Stephanie Spellers, Church Publishing Inc. 2006.

Whilst local congregations develop new ways of belonging, the denominational structures to which those local congregations belong also need to appreciate the nature of belonging which will allow for more diverse ways of belonging to church. John Drane suggests a “stakeholder model of church,”

“...in which there could and would be a place for diverse groups of people, who might be at different stages in their journey of faith, but who would be bound together by their commitment to one another and to the reality of the spiritual search, rather than by inherited definitions of institutional membership.”⁸

Leadership

Some of these hints represent significant changes to the ethos, structure and operations of local congregations and denominations. Crucial to the future shaping of the Church for mission will be issues relating to leadership. What kind of leadership does the Church need? This is not necessarily the same thing as the leadership the Church wants, as the two things may be completely different.

Inevitably, consideration will need to be given to the economics of equipping and educating leaders. But the question of what models of leadership are required should not be driven just by economics. The missionary purpose and calling of the Church should play an important part in helping shape the ways in which leadership is developed and deployed in local congregations. It is worthwhile considering the role of the church leader as an enabler and encourager of others in doing mission, rather than as the leader or as is often the perception, the main doer of mission. The separation of leaders from laity and professionalising of ministry has led to a de-skilling of many local congregations over generations, with some congregations finding it almost impossible to function without paid ministry.

Leadership in a Church shaped for mission will need to be able to help the congregation understand its missionary purpose, work to equip and enable individual Christians in their discipleship and develop their mission skills. The church leader will need to be equipped in social analysis, skilled in reading the

⁸ “The McDonaldization of the Church,” John Drane, Longmann and Todd, 1985)

community and be able to forge all kinds of partnerships and connections. This will require not just a change in seminary training but also in the mindset of many churches, who perceive paid ministry as a private chaplain to an ever decreasing group of people.

A Biblical Reflection "On the move."

The book of Exodus presents the story of the Hebrew people of God escaping from slavery in Egypt, through forty years of wandering in the wilderness to finally arriving in the Promised Land.

Recognising that there are significant theological and interpretative questions about the story e.g. the story involves the forced removal of other resident nations etc, it provides an image to draw on when considering the missional nature of today's church. In later chapters of Exodus, Moses is given instructions for the ordering of social and religious life within the community. One of the tasks the Hebrew people are given is to build a "Tent of the Lord's Presence," or "Tabernacle" as a meeting place for the people, a place for worship and a place to the safekeeping of religious symbols. The story tells how all the people bring their wealth and specialist crafts people are appointed to complete the construction of the tabernacle.

Exodus 40:34-38 tells us the presence of God among the people was discerned in a cloud over the tent throughout the day and a pillar of fire through the night. Whenever the cloud or fire moved the people relocated the whole camp including the meeting "tabernacle."

"Then the cloud covered the Tent and the dazzling light of the LORD's presence filled it. Because of this, Moses could not go into the Tent. The Israelites moved their camp to another place only when the cloud lifted from the Tent. As long as the cloud stayed there, they did not move their camp. During all their wanderings they could see the cloud of the LORD's presence over the Tent during the day and a fire burning above it during the night." (Exodus 40:34-38)

It is the lightness of their religious structures, the ability to relocate the worshipping community to keep in step with God's presence that is most commendable as an image for the church today. The future of the Church in Europe is dependent on having structures which are lightweight enough to be re-ordered for mission purposes and yet also able to sustain followers of Jesus, but most importantly the Church's structures need to be transportable enough so that the church can keep in step with where God's Spirit is leading. It has been said that "Christian mission is discerning what God is doing and joining in." Often it can feel as if Church structures, hierarchies and attitudes prevent or at least hinder the ability for the "joining in."

In the Prologue of John's Gospel we read that "The Word became a human being and, full of grace and truth, lived among us. We saw his glory, the glory which he received as the Father's only Son." (John 1:14) "Lived among us" literally means "booths" or "tabernacles," so the "Word" comes and "tabernacles" amongst his people or put another 'the Word comes and pitches his tent.' There is a clear connection between the tabernacle in the Exodus story and the way that Jesus comes from God to live amongst humankind. Jesus comes in a way that evades capture by those who would pin him down, always moving the 'goal posts' so that the edges to community and the qualifications for disciples are always being expanded, he is always on the move despite the attempts of disciples to make fixed structures (Luke 9:28-36) that will fix his ideas at some agreed point.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Church at the margins needs to be 'lighter on its feet' in order to move and communicate effectively. This lightness is both in terms of denominational structures that release historic resources for new expressions of Christian community and to develop lighter structures, theological understandings and mechanics that will enable and empower local missional congregations.

In turn local congregations need to find new ways to engage with the local communities in which they are set; value and develop networks where they

already have people so they are enabled and equipped to be involved in mission in the workplace, pub, gym, school etc. Helping Christians see that they are missionaries in these settings – without adding to people’s extensive ‘guilt list’ – is crucial if people are to make connections between their spirituality and their work and if they are to form purposeful relationships for the sake of the kingdom.

Wayne Hawkins

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