

Baby or Bathwater?

Must we ditch traditional church structures to do mission well? A perspective from the Emerging Church in the UK



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Part of the genius of the gospel is that it has been able to take root and grow in the soil of cultures and communities across the world and down the ages. Good mission (we now know) would hope for, and expect, the fruit of the gospel to be Christian communities that reflect local cultures, languages, ways of relating, music, rituals and so on, with leadership that is truly indigenous and is able to improvise imaginatively the gospel in and out of the cultural context. We also know this is a lot trickier in practice than this sounds. We are painfully aware of the complex mix of contextual and imperialistic mission practice whose legacy is visible around the world.

The Western world has changed hugely in recent decades and undergone a paradigm shift from modern to post-modern times. Virtually every sector of life and culture has struggled with this change. And the church is no different, finding the challenge of change difficult. A number of pioneers and younger leaders, native to this emerging postmodern culture, have instinctively done what many missionaries have done before, followed the beckoning of the Spirit, shared the gospel and developed Christian communities within this culture(s). Emerging churches are simply communities who practice the way of Jesus in postmodern cultures [1].

The quest or journey they have been on has led to much deeper changes than initially imagined as they have deconstructed many inherited forms and structures of church from the modern era and re-imagined emerging theology, leadership, discipleship, spirituality, worship, evangelism, and patterns of church life.

In the UK we have an unusual situation. Broadly speaking the institutional church has recognised and baptised this movement. A number of factors have created a culture of permission for newness and experimentation within the structures of the institutional church.

- a) We have been given the gift of loyal radicals, people who have a radical vision of mission but have, sometimes through gritted teeth, remained part of and within the institution, rather than upping sticks and leaving. Those people have worked with patience and faithfulness to bring change.
- b) The track record of the house churches birthed in the seventies that went for independence but ended up with controlling leadership and dogma and a culture time-warped in the seventies, proved to be sobering. It created a hesitancy about following suit and leaving in a quest for independence. People asked 'What would stop the same thing from happening to us?'
- c) In a postmodern culture older things have a currency. At a time when culture seems to be changing so fast, to be able to be located in a tradition that has been passed down for 2000 years gives a real sense of 'weight', a much needed anchor point in the world. And it is a tradition with a vast amount of resources and an incredible global network.
- d) Mission Shaped Church, penned by some of the loyal radicals above, became a best seller [2] and combined with the appointment of Rowan Williams and his genius vision of a mixed economy church, created a new

environment. Opening up a new pathway for ordaining pioneer ministers, and the creation of bishop's mission orders to plant new kinds of non-parochial churches have even changed legislation at the heart of the establishment.

e) The well documented decline in church attendance and accompanying financial pressures have certainly created some pressure towards change or newness.

It depends on where these communities are located on how much they have re-imagined the traditional church structures, but many have found plenty of freedom in terms of leadership structures, liturgies, where to meet, discipleship, mission, worship and so on. The key issue has often been negotiating space within the broad structures with enough room for manoeuvre and improvisation. This sounds too rosy – church can be frustrating, stuck, dying, wedded to a bygone era, controlling, dogmatic, and overloaded with priestcraft. There can be no permission and no resources. It does depend on where you are.

So, unsurprisingly, parallel to these positive developments, many groups have emerged or developed outside of institutional structures. There has been an exodus from church. And many things have emerged amongst those who have left - new monastic communities, gatherings round the meal table, mission cells, co-operatives, mission houses, missional communities, post church groups and so on. And doubtless some have just drifted solo. These last are hard to quantify or measure as they are under the radar of ways of measuring church attendance. An optimistic view is that the exodus of some from church is part of a mission movement in postmodern cultures, another way the church is emerging.

Alan Jamieson's research amongst church leavers [3] led him and Jenny Macintosh to develop 'Spirited Exchanges' in New Zealand, a network of post church groups for people who, contrary to what the church assumed, had left church but not given up on faith. He says "It is my belief that these post church groups give us some indication of what will be the shape of a major sector of the church in the future... ...Are the post church groups forerunners of new forms of faith in our own rapidly changing society?... God is allowing a new thing to grow". He suggests 5 lessons that churches could learn from post church groups.

1. A focus on community, integrity of participation, dialogue in finding truth, minimalist structures and transparent leadership
2. A high priority given to emotions, laughter and intuition
3. An openness to a broad eclectic use of worship styles
4. An openness to people who think and believe differently
5. The journey for the churches to an honest engagement with postmodern culture, involving a major shift.

There is now a loose network of Spirited Exchanges in the UK.

The shift in communication technologies in a networked society has also meant that it is possible to 'leave' and remain connected to the body of Christ in all sorts of creative ways. The old adage, or piece of scare-mongering, of taking a coal out the fire and placing it on the hearth being a picture of what happens if you are not at church, is not what people experience if they leave the traditional structures now. They can leave and remain related locally and globally and be on fire.

I am relaxed and hopeful about all of these things. Both ways, staying and leaving, can be good. Renewal comes from the edge and the centre, within and without, and if the church is emerging both ways that seems good. Let some leave and pioneer and let some people stay and pioneer. The wider mission community should certainly be able to celebrate the newness of God's work, both in and outside of traditional structures, by crossing cultures and setting up new paradigms. It has been a privilege to work with CMS who have invested in encouraging both, though I have been surprised at how threatened by and resistant some parts of the mission community worldwide are to this challenge, judging by articles and reviews in mission journals.

This conversation – about what is relevant to the culture – has happened in relation to the cultural imperialism of Western Christians elsewhere in the world. We should not be threatened by the same discussion in relation to our own cultural contexts. For example I came across the Lambeth 1988 statement on liturgical inculturation 'Down To Earth'. The encouragement for innovation and creativity, the need for connection with people's feelings, the scope of change required, and the awareness of the way the church has alienated people by its lack of inculturation are astonishing to read in such an official document. These insights were written to help the Anglican churches around the world to develop their own authentic expressions of faith. If the forms of institutional church life in the UK are wedded to modernity, the same insights need to be applied on our own doorstep to inculturate the faith in postmodern times.

The word 'tradition' is an interesting one. Sometimes what people mean by it is 'the way we've always done things' which inevitably leads to stuckness. It is the sort of thing that leads to the view expressed in an editorial of the International Bulletin of Missionary Research on churchless Christianity: "Christianity in its most visible and impressively organised forms has steadily resisted those persons and practices most integral to its spiritual renewal and hence survival..." The basic and seemingly obvious point about the Christian tradition is that it is living and not closed or completed. In this respect, our use of 'tradition' to defend the status quo is not faithful to the tradition at all. Jaroslav Pelikan says that in this kind of scenario religious leaders are defending not tradition but traditionalism [4] One is living, the other is dead. Part of the process of carrying a tradition forward is struggling with it, and engaging in its own debates. A tradition needs diversity at its heart. In this respect whilst tradition does in some respects provide limits, it also gives the tools to liberate us from the way traditions have been used against us. Wherever the message of Jesus for today is distorted, the tradition needs correction and to keep reforming religious tradition in a prophetic spirit is to be faithful. This reformatory impulse is at the heart of the tradition. To deny it is 'to disallow that subversive and dangerous memory of Jesus in the church' [5]. But paradoxically it is the resources from within the tradition itself which will subvert the inadequacies and injustices of a religious tradition. To preserve a tradition then is to drive to the heart of it, to understand its significance, and then do our best to re-present the same field of reference in our own context. Tom Wright's notion of 'faithful improvisation' opens up a creative way of living out of the resources and imagination of the tradition in life-giving ways. A case can be made out that the emerging churches are traditional and proud of it. Taking the eucharist into the context of a meal is traditional! This is a very different sensibility to the modernising moves made by new churches in the 70s.

Of course there are challenges – theological education, ordination, the Eucharist, Anglican identity to name a few small ones! But a glance elsewhere at other Western contexts where the emerging church is growing is a reminder of the uniqueness of the UK situation. There is much more polarity in the US between 'Emergent' and the mainline denominations for example, and frustration within some who are trying to broker the conversation in mainline contexts at the tone of Emergent. In Australia Alan Hirsch and Michael Frost's anti-institutional tone has not made it easy for those working on the inside of denominations to

join in the conversation in the same way, and, in part, the denominational contexts are harder – there is not the same openness and there has been a lack of loyal radicals on the inside.

Church is the whole body of Christ world wide and down the ages, visible and invisible. We only really know who Jesus is as we see the many faces of Christ, the theological takes and expressions of his body around the world and down the ages [6]. It takes a whole world to understand a whole Jesus Christ [7]. Church is not just a nice idea – it is about knowing Jesus. Whichever way the emerging church plays out its mission, that connectivity into Christ's one holy catholic and apostolic church is crucial. That does not necessarily mean institutionally, but relationally and in the spirit and heart of its leaders.

So my take is that the emerging church in the UK is growing out of contextual mission in postmodern cultures seeking to grow indigenous expressions of church that are both related to the wider body of Christ and faithfully improvised out of the riches of the tradition within and without the traditional structures. Must we reject traditional structures to do mission well? Not necessarily, though plenty will be ditched and new things brought into play out of the tradition, and that will be fine. Are we in danger of throwing baby out with bath water? No - not in the UK. We have an amazing gift at this moment in time that I thank God for, especially when I travel to other parts of the world.

Notes

[1] This is Ryan Bolger and Eddie Gibbs' conclusion in their book *Emerging Churches*.

[2] *Mission Shaped Church* was an official C of E and Methodist report.

[3] His research was published as *Churchless Faith*, and these quotes are from an article in the *International Review of Mission*, April 2003

[4] Pelikan, J. *The Vindication of Tradition*, Yale University Press, 1984

[5] Tracy, D. *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism*, Crossroads, 1991

[6] In mission-speak this is what Andrew Walls refers to as 'the Ephesians moment' or what others have called 'the ontic expansion of God in Jesus Christ'.

[7] The words belong to Max Warren

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