



Modern Church

faith in the world

The Church of England:

Mission and Ministry After the Decade of Evangelism

*The Very Revd Professor Martyn Percy, Dean of Christ Church, Oxford,
Vice President of Modern Church*

A few years ago, we crossed an un-marked line in the developmental life of the Church of England. The best-selling report ever produced by the Church of England had been *Faith in the City*. Published in 1985, it engaged seriously with the decay and despair in our inner-city communities. It changed, among other things, how we shaped the training of clergy. It championed the poor. It shone a very public spotlight on our Urban Priority Areas (UPAs). And for focussing on UPAs, the report earned the opprobrium and scorn of the right-wing press.

But perhaps the more serious, and often missed, edge to the report was that it marked out a particularly distinctive mode of theological reflection. What *Faith in the City* represented was a kind of theology rooted in the Kingdom of God; one that put the people and the places they lived in before the needs and concerns of the Church. The report took seriously the fact that before the Church took root as an institution, with its own needs and concerns to develop much later, the 'Jesus Project' began with preaching and proclaiming in word and deed, the Kingdom of God for all.

However, the moment of *Faith in the City* being the Church of England's best-selling report, has now passed. The biggest-selling Church of England report is now *Mission-Shaped Church*. For the uninitiated, this showcases forms of congregational life that appeal to homogenous groups, and are largely Evangelical and evangelistic in character, appealing to specific, identifiable and narrow interest groups (e.g. certain kinds of youth culture.) These new genres of church, as they emerge, are usually apolitical in outlook, and often tend to be socially, politically and theologically conservative, as the US sociologist of religion Robert Bellah observed.

Thus, new forms of 'Fresh Expression' promoted by the Church of England are normally careful to avoid anything that could be construed as theologically, politically or socially divisive. At the same time, these groups inhabit a social and theological construction of reality in which they believe themselves to be risk-takers and edgy. But they are usually anything but this. So, for example, we rarely learn of 'Fresh Expressions' for the LGBTI community. We rarely find any 'Fresh Expressions' that focus on disabilities or, for that matter, on any serious forms of exclusion from mainstream society. The 'Fresh Expression' for people seeking asylum would be an interesting kind of ecclesial gathering.

We must also remember that Jesus did not plant synagogues. Jesus did not grow synagogue congregations. Jesus did not advocate 'Fresh Expressions' of synagogue. But Jesus did spend time with the marginalised and disenfranchised. Jesus did challenge prevailing religious structures and outlooks. Jesus did admit people to the Kingdom of God who were not Jewish - often, unconditionally. None were Christian at that point, or became so, needless to say.

To be sure, there are other kinds of ecclesial community that are advocated by *Mission-Shaped Church* and its spin-offs. So-called 'pioneer ministry' places clergy or lay ministers in communities or neighbourhoods that do not have access to a local church, or are for other reasons excluded or marginalised from socio-ecclesial life. There are some remarkable testimonies of such ministry in places and amongst people that are 'off the grid', so to speak.

For example, I think of one Pioneer Minister who trained at Cuddesdon while I was Principal there, who went on to minister in a working-class community with high levels of historic unemployment, and exceptionally low literacy rates. In such a place, gathering people around a written liturgy was always unlikely to be the best recipe for ecclesial life. The 'church' that was planted in the community began with some basics - helping people to read for a start, which was itself a commendable act of socio-political intervention, empowering the community to engage with the social and civic services that were neglecting the community as a whole.

The origins of our problem probably lie with the Decade of Evangelism. There was little discontent and much optimism when the 1988 Lambeth Conference passed a resolution approving a Decade of Evangelism. Each Province of the

Anglican Communion was to develop plans for evangelism that led up the millennium. Most did, including the Church of England. But this essentially marked a departure from *Faith in the City*, because by the late 1980s, a new cultural turn in the Church of England was already under way. The Church of England was shifting to the right - away from politics and *Faith in the City*, and towards charismatic evangelicalism. This emphasised individual decisions for salvation, and healing as something individuals could claim and attain - despite poverty being the major cause of most illness.

Nonetheless, the late 1980s saw a significant ascendancy for evangelicals in the Church of England, and the Decade of Evangelism would be, to a large extent, a vehicle that gave them further prominence. Time, energies and resources were channelled in to making the Decade successful. With evangelism now firmly on the radar, this ought to have been the moment for evangelicals - the resident specialists in evangelistic theory and practice. But the Decade was essentially an underwhelming affair; church attendance and membership continued to decline, and as the more the evangelical wing of the Church asserted its overt brand of faith, the public quietly stepped back.

The problem - the legacy of this Decade, in effect - can be simply expressed. The Church of England - or at least its hierarchy - are stuck in *broadcast* mode. Like the proverbial Englishman abroad, they cannot make themselves understood in a world that increasingly finds the Church incomprehensible, especially in spheres such as sexuality, gender, equality, safeguarding, the exercise of power, the holding of authority and being open to accountability. But does the Church perceive this? No. It just talks louder, hoping, somehow, it will be heard. It won't.

In all this, the Church only seeks to make itself more appealing, and attractive to those who might join. Yet it rarely asks the same public why they don't join. It is like a business doing even more hard selling, with increasing desperation, but unwilling to ask the consumers why they aren't buying.

What is strange about this situation is that the drivers of the agenda are deeply concerned about mission and evangelism. So, they act out of the best of intentions. But the problem is that the underlying theology of mission and of the Holy Spirit - missiology and pneumatology - is deeply deficient.

Expressive evangelistic campaigns tend to achieve very little. Even the Evangelical Alliance admitted in 1994 that the main achievement of the Decade was to establish 'new levels of co-operation between the Churches'. Hardly a great result but, as other writers in the field of missiology had known for years, what was compelling and credible was an authentic and humble Church. One that listened deeply and lived its faith, faithfully and unassumingly, rather than brashly promoting its brand. John V. Taylor's classic *The Go-Between God* (SCM, 1974), describes true mission as finding out what God is doing, and then trying to co-operate. Evangelism, said Taylor, is first and foremost God's work; not a sacrificial effort on the part of the churches to appease God.

This *Missio Dei* is our traditional way, as a Church, of understanding how God acts in the world, to reconcile all things to God through Christ. This recognises that God is omnipresent, and so can and does act in all creation - not just within the recognised boundaries of ecclesial life (which are, in any case, like all borders, inherently contestable and marginal). There is ample scriptural warrant for thinking about the work of the Holy Spirit in just this way. The Jewish disciples, for example, 'discovering' that God is at work amongst the gentiles - and that God had started something in those communities before any proactive mission had got underway.

The *Missio Dei* recognises something crucial in God's ecology of mission, namely, that God might choose to speak *from* the world *to* the Church. The Church, in other words, is not always God's starting point for conversion-related initiatives. Sometimes, God needs to convert the Church and can't do it from within. So, God works from without. The Holy Spirit is omnipresent, and at work ahead of the Church, and outside it. As always the question is, can the Church recognise this? Can the Church *receive* what the Spirit is doing beyond its boundaries, and in the act of reception, be prepared to be reformed and renewed?

The answer from the churches to such questions - say on issues of gender, sexuality and equality - is frequently, 'no'. The Church will not receive the progressive truth, justice and change that the world has undertaken and adopted. The Church resists the change. It resists contemporary culture. It does not believe that the Holy Spirit could be at work independent of Church leaders in our contemporary culture and could use that cultural change to

reform and renew the Church. So, the world, slowly but surely, backs away from the Church, and leaves it to live in its own bubble of self-justifying rhetoric and self-shaping strategies. This gets the Church nowhere, except further up the creek without a paddle. And as for evangelism, only the converted are left to be preached at.

It is perhaps interesting to point out the unevenness and contradictions of the Church here. We are apparently very willing and able to receive expertise from the private sector in spheres such as the re-shaping of the financial funding formulas for clergy training. Or for providing a more 'incentivised' and 'targeted' approach to diocesan subsidies, that replaces a commitment of supplementation with entrepreneurial 'growth-led' bids that are then rewarded with 'grants'.

But the Church can't seem to receive the wisdom of the world on equality legislation, safeguarding practices and protocols, the treatment of LGBTI clergy and laity, and gender-related policies, which might include developing joined up thinking on anything from maternity leave to sexual harassment. Here, the Church lags behind the world, locked into its own kind of bunker mentality. Meanwhile, a posse of ex-bankers and former civil servants are given free rein to reform the Church in much the way they please.

We should be alive to the paradoxes here. As one commentator put it to me, it is as though the Christian Union have taken over the College Chapel, but the people now running the reformed services can't understand why all the people who used to come no longer attend. No amount of reorganisation or enhanced evangelism can take away from the fact that the world, as a whole, experiences the way the Church behaves as *alienating*. Pastorally, on the ground, we remain good, kind, authentic and engaged. It is the direction of travel and drive of the hierarchy that let us down.

So, any decent missiology would always critique the notion that a church or congregation is in possession of God's power and simply has a range of choices on how it reifies and dispenses such power. Any proper 'Kingdom theology' would try and reverse this perception. Can God not bring the gospel to the Church from outside - and through agents and channels the Church would not normally regard as pure, licensed or proper?

This is the essence of Vincent Donovan's *Christianity Rediscovered* (SCM, 1978) and the way in which the missionary was transformed by the Masai: those to be converted are the ones who do the converting. I'm also reminded of two very contrasting approaches to mission witnessed thirty years ago, while I was training for ordination. Both were in a UPA in the North-East. The first project was evangelical, intense and focussed on converting local people. The evangelical mission lasted just a few years - and then left: a lack of 'results', apparently. Stony ground, I dare say.

The second, Franciscan, arrived empty-handed. They drew in the community by asking them if they could help furnish the brother's bare flat. The locals obliged. The first item to arrive was a chair for the unfurnished sitting room – a passenger seat taken from a written-off Ford Capri. More bits of odd furniture arrived. A kettle was found. The brothers rejoiced at every gift. The Franciscans still work there in the community.

The Franciscans came to a community usually written off as a place of poverty and lack. Yet, as the brothers brought nothing, they affirmed their neighbours. They were able to encounter and encourage a community that was generous and resourceful. They liked to give, and they took pleasure and pride in looking after those less fortunate than themselves. That included the brothers.

In return, the brothers simply offered a ministry that listened, and only then helped. The brothers made no assumptions about what the community lacked. They went in, expecting to find God's provision in what many would have described as a desert. They lived joyfully with their people and did not presume any lacking on the part of the community they served. For the Franciscans, God was already dwelling there - long before they arrived. The same principles are at work in the beautiful novel by Dominique Lapierre, *The City of Joy* (Arrow, 1985), set in the slums of Kolkata, West Bengal.

John Robinson, in his fine work *The New Reformation* (SCM 1965, p.27), wrote:

'We have got to relearn that "the house of God" is primarily the world in which God lives, not the contractor's hut set up in the grounds...'

Put another way, the Church was only ever meant to be the constructor's hut

on God's building site, which is the world (or if preferred, substitute 'world' for 'Kingdom of God'). The Church is not God's main project. The world is.

So, let me give two examples of what this looks like in terms of mission and ministry. The first is reactive; the second proactive. Both remind us that the Church must listen if it wishes to speak; be silent if it wishes to proclaim.

The first has the same roots (i.e. trauma) that gave birth to the Samaritans under the Revd Chad Varah. As a curate in the city of Lincoln in 1935, Varah took the funeral of a fourteen-year-old girl, who had killed herself because she had started her menstrual cycle. It led Varah to pilot sex education in the parish he was serving – he later founded a free and confidential help and listening service to 'befriend the suicidal and despairing'. In 1953, he founded the Samaritans in the crypt of his London church, attributing the death of the girl - whom he did not know - as the seed that gave birth to this extraordinary new work. A ministry, effectively, that transcended the Church.

In a similar vein, the suicide of another fourteen-year-old girl in 2014 also caused a change in direction for ministry. This time, the girl had taken her life because she feared she might be gay. She was a member of a prominent evangelical Church of England congregation in Didsbury, Manchester. She believed that to be a lesbian was wrong - the teaching of the Church said so. Unable to cope with the guilt, her feelings, and her sense that she would face condemnation - in this life, or the next - she took her own life.

The suicide had a significant impact on the congregation. The girl had been a prominent member of the youth group. But in the congregational soul-searching that followed in the wake of the suicide, that church began to change. It moved from being benignly homophobic to being proactively inclusive. Some stable members of this evangelical church therefore left. But new people came, including groups and individuals who had never felt they could be welcomed at a church such as this. The congregation grew, even though it had moved from being evangelical to inclusive.

My second illustration comes from Australia and is an example of some extraordinary progressive pastoral ministry. Like many clergy, the Rector of this parish was more than used to being asked by new parents, who had little

or no relation to the Church, if they would nonetheless baptise their child who had been recently born. Most clergy would respond to this request with encouragement and catechesis. The clergy would normally insist on stipulating a course of Christian instruction for the parents - sometimes lasting months. Many clergy would also insist that the baptism took place in the context of a normal act of worship, in order to enculturate the parents, godparents, wider family and friends into the ways of faith.

But not this priest. The Rector took a different view, and let the parents choose the time for the baptism to begin with - a Saturday, or even a Sunday afternoon, and a (so-called) 'private' ceremony was countenanced. Frequently, this was the preferred option, as it suited families with their dispersed range of relatives. When seeing the parents, the Rector would go further. To begin with, he handed over a copy of the Bible and a hymn book, invited the couple to keep these copies, and choose a hymn and a Bible reading for their service. He made it clear that they could also use other songs and readings - but they were to choose a hymn and a Bible reading that spoke to the couple about what God meant to them in the birth of this child. So far, so good.

Then he added this. The couple were to choose between themselves, or nominate someone else from the wider family, a person to give the short homily that accompanies the baptism. Yes, the family were going to provide the preacher. But the sermon was a simple thing, explained the Rector, and need cover only three things. First, what were their family values? What did this family stand for, and what mattered to them as virtues? Second, how were the family and friends attending the baptism proposing to raise this child in accordance with those values? And third, as they had chosen the hymn and a Bible reading, how did the rookie preacher think God was going to be involved in this family now, and helping with the raising of this child? How would they collectively respond to God's commitment to this child in baptism?

As the Rector reported, no family ever failed to produce a riveting, rich sermon and testimony to God's grace and providence. Instead of the Church preaching *at* the family, hoping a few seeds would take root - somehow - the Rector got the family to preach to themselves. The result was that most of the seeds at least germinated. And many took root. As an exercise in evangelism this was far more effective - and, of course, it proceeds from a trusting,

generous-orthodox pneumatology and missiology.

In this example, the Church places itself in a humble position where it receives the gospel from the world. It is a risk, to be sure. But it does not fatally fall for the flaw that always assumes the Church possesses the truth and needs to pester the world with it, or permanently casts itself in the role of broadcaster to a largely indifferent audience. This approach to evangelism strikes an entirely different note. Most clergy would feel obliged to preach at the baptism and to the gathering. The Rector's initiative, however, ensured that the family remembered the homily for a long time: every word. They had preached it.

In a similar vein, the same Rector used to hold a monthly Evensong, and invite local community leaders, heads of local business, charities or other members of the community, to preach. The same formula was followed: a Bible and hymn book handed over to the unsuspecting (often non-religious, or non-observant individual), inviting them to pick a hymn and Bible passage, then talk to the congregation - and any of their friends or colleagues whom they invited to come along - about what their work meant to the town, how it built up community values, contributed to wider society, and supported others. As the Rector said, it was the easiest way to get several dozen new people into the church every month. They simply could not contain their curiosity at what one of their own might say from the pulpit about values, hope and faith. And God. No-one declined the invitation. And all had something to say about the good news for the community. God spoke through each preacher.

(A note to anxious clergy at this point. Yes, the Rector always had a spare homily just in case. And yes, those preaching at a baptism or one of the Evensongs often checked their text with the Rector beforehand - only natural when it is your first time preaching in front of friends, family and colleagues).

If we started with a theology of evangelism rooted in the values of the Kingdom of God and *Missio Dei*, the churches would spend much more time listening, and less time talking; more time receiving from the world, and less time pumping out propaganda. But I wonder, sometimes, if church leaders really trust God, and genuinely believe in the omnipresent power of the Holy Spirit abroad in mission? Our leaders don't talk and behave as though they do. They seem to think it all depends on them. They sound, all too often, like

sacred custodians of a tribal deity in a remote village. Their God is small and tame; but it is *their* god. All transcendence has been thoroughly domesticated.

Too often, our church leaders behave as though all that matters is the Church. Sometimes the reputation and safeguarding of the Church can be put before justice, integrity and truth - even before compassion. To borrow from Pope Francis, the Church is not a 'custom house' - it is a field hospital. It exists not for the perfect, but for sinners. God's mercy extends far beyond the Church. Our leaders, though, conservative as they are, create a kind of 'marsh' on areas like safeguarding, gender and sexuality, only hampering progress. Their world is one of determined resistance, born of fearful or hardened hearts, content with the empty rhetoric of (spiritual) window-dressing, typical of those who say they are ready for change, but want everything to remain as before. Yet tradition is not an unchangeable bank account - it is the doctrine of going forward. The essential does not change, but it grows and develops. How does it grow and develop? It grows like a person - through dialogue, with ourselves and the world around us. If we are not engaged in dialogue, we are not able to grow. The Church will stand still. It will remain small. We will eventually be dwarfed by the world around us. People will speak over our heads.

'Jesus is the answer, what was your question?' would be a fair characterisation of our current evangelistic approach as a national Church. If our Church leaders think they have all the answers, behaving like defensive omni-competent rulers, I doubt we will sound as though we are genuinely interested in the concerns and questions people may have. If the Church of England really wants to recover some vision for national mission, and something of the urgency of evangelism, there is only one thing to do to begin with. Nothing.

Yes, nothing. Just be still. And learn to listen to the world around. Then we might hear what the actual cares and concerns of our communities are. Then we might begin to discern where God is already at work. Then we might receive from these communities what God would have this Church become.

MWP, May 2018