

The Great Leap Forward (Part One)
Ecclesionomics for the Church of England

Martyn Percy

Your Church Can Grow! Nine outstanding alumni pastors join Dr Robert Schuller for a power-packed Institute for Successful Church Leadership... You will learn...how they made their churches grow, what makes success, how obstacles are overcome, ministry principles that work, and how to build a great church... (Advertisement for Church Growth Conference: *Christianity Today Magazine*, July 1987, p. 62).

I had to pinch myself the other day, when reading the *Church Times*. This doesn't happen often – the pinching I mean. But pinch I did, as I read of plans for 10,000 new lay-led churches by 2030. Moreover, ones that did not cost too much, need buildings, or costly well-trained and theologically-literate clergy. As these new lay-led churches will all be headed by the 'right kinds' of Christians, there should be no fear of heterodoxy being modelled, or heresy being taught and preached. Orthodox Christianity – the gospel – has presumably never needed egghead theologians or church fathers to guard the truth or correct error. There are many self-appointed purveyors of truth leading churches in London right now who can keep us all on the straight and narrow. These are the 'right kind' of Christians, so we can all relax.

We were also told we are going to double the number of children and double the number of "active young disciples" (presumably the passive ones don't count, whoever they are). This breath-taking news comes from the Gregory Centre for Church Multiplication in London. Many of these churches, we are told, would start small with only 20-30 people meeting in a home. I pinched myself again. Who has a home big enough for 10 people, let alone for 20-30? Some may, but most won't. Then there is the maths. To grow at the rate of 10,000 by 2030, there will need to be three new church plants per-day. That's right. Three a day; twenty-one per week.

The drivers of this initiative are sufficiently savvy to recognise that this 'vision' could be received with some of the weariness and apprehension that might customarily accompany just one more new initiative. Their counsel was instructive here. This is not a new initiative to bolt on to existing programmes, we were told. It was, rather, a re-set of the compass. All the things that are currently going on, guiding, preoccupying and consuming the energies of the church can be set aside, and this new, final push, fully embraced, would set us on the right course.

The Great Leap Forward? This seems to be what was on offer, and in a week marking the centenary of the Chinese Communist Party, I wondered at the possible parallels. I had to pinch myself again when I read the Archbishop of Canterbury had stated that “we don’t preach morality – we plant churches; we don’t preach (therapeutic) care – we plant churches”. Growth and multiplication, it seemed, had become our apotheosis. Forget care, forget morality: just go forth and multiply.

The article in the *Church Times* appeared opposite the announcement that the Methodists had just voted to permit same-sex weddings. As over 90% of the UK’s young people affirm same-sex unions, and regard such unions as completely normal and a matter of equality, I did wonder what kind of morality and care the Church of England was modelling for our gay and lesbian neighbours. I wondered too, how we were going to double the number of “active young disciples”, given our toxic record on sexuality and gender. Or address our issues of care for clergy under the heel of brutalising CDM proceedings, or being mangled by the machinations of the NST. Or, our care and compassion for the victims of abuse, who are given the run-around by our reputational PR-managers.

I am also doubtful about house-churches being the next bright hope for the future. At their last peak in the 1980’s, the House Church Movement in the UK could perhaps claim a quarter of a million adherents. The number today is probably well under 10,000, with some estimates closer to 5,000. Many of those that were so popular in the last quarter of the twentieth century dissolved when the leaders died. Or, were subject to intense question of financial and sexual probity. Many of these House Churches would not be classed as case-studies in spiritual abuse, the misuse of power, and safeguarding nightmares. I am sure that the Gregory Centre for Church Multiplication has taken all these recent church history lessons on board. But I do wonder who these new 10,000 safeguarding leads in the lay-led congregations are going to be, and who is going to train and supervise them. Bishops, perhaps?

I also wonder if the drivers of this new initiative – a kind of ‘ecclesial final solution’ – have really done their homework on young people. Even amongst evangelical youth, toleration or affirmation of same-sex relationships, people of other faiths and cultural diversity, suggests that the old conversionist paradigms are not engaging emerging generations of evangelicals. Fellowship and worship may be cherished, but the teaching is received on an a-la-carte basis. Few of today’s evangelical youth will read evangelical books. Many have never heard of the likes of John Stott or Jim Packer. Nor are students getting advice on sexual relationships from the likes of evangelical gurus such as Joyce Huggett, Lewis Smedes or John White. Christian Unions at our universities and colleges are numerically tiny, and primarily exist for comforting fellowship and mutual support.

However, the Gregory Centre for Church Multiplication is here to “[equip] today’s churches, planters and pioneers to multiply”. The Centre leads with an encouraging quote from that doyen of the Church Growth Movement, C. Peter Wagner, taken from his *Church Planting for a Greater Harvest* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2010): “the single most effective evangelistic methodology under heaven is planting new churches”. The question is, exactly what is that is being multiplied, and why?

The bishop and missionary theologian Leslie Newbigin diagnosed the problem with the Church Growth Movement with these words:

*Modern capitalism has created a world totally different from anything known before. Previous ages have assumed that resources are limited and that economics – housekeeping – is about how to distribute them fairly. Since Adam Smith, we have learned to assume that exponential growth is the basic law of economics and that no limits can be set to it. The result is that increased production has become an end in itself; products are designed to become rapidly obsolete so as to make room for more production; a minority is ceaselessly urged to multiply its wants in order to keep the process going while the majority lacks the basic necessities for existence; and the whole ecosystem upon which human life depends is threatened with destruction (Leslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, London: SPCK, 1986, p. 38).*

This might seem sufficient as a critique, in effect framing church growth thinking within the ecology of capitalism. But Newbigin turns the critique into something altogether more surprising, and here perhaps has in mind the metaphor of the church as the body of Christ (Romans 12:5; 1 Corinthians 12:12–27; Ephesians 3:6 and 5:23; Colossians 1:18 and Colossians 1:24):

Growth is for the sake of growth and is not determined by any overarching social purpose. And that, of course, is an exact account of the phenomenon which, when it occurs in the human body, is called cancer. In the long perspective of history, it would be difficult to deny that the exuberant capitalism of the past 250 years will be diagnosed in the future as a desperately dangerous case of cancer in the body of human society – if indeed this cancer has not been terminal and there are actually survivors around to make the diagnosis (Newbigin, 1986, p. 38).

As Albert Einstein once opined, not everything that counts can be counted; and not everything that is counted, counts. Counting ‘members’ or the hard, inner core of congregational attendees does not tell the whole story; indeed, it does not even account for the half of it.

The mission of the Church is a vocation to serve communities, not just convert individuals into members and grow that body exponentially. Partly for this reason, the insights of Newbigin and other interlocutors may suggest the church growth merchants perhaps ought to be more cautious when it comes to framing ministerial

and missional paradigms and ecclesial life, through the lens of growth-success-related moulds. As one writer puts it:

What is happening to ministries that equip the saints for the work of service when we adopt the language and values of the corporate world and describe ministers as Chief Executive Officers, Heads of Staff, Executive Pastors, Directors of this and that? Why is it that ministers' studies have become offices? [This] may be superficial evidences of the problem ... [but it is what happens] when the values of the corporate world join with the values of the market place in the church (Darrell Guder, *Called to Witness: Doing Missional Theology*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015, p. 37).

Guder's missiological and ecclesial assessment articulates what many critics of the Church Growth Movement have said before. That for all the apparent success, there is an underlying functionalism that may be doing significant damage to the organic nature of ecclesial polity and its grounded, local life. The apparent success may, in fact, turn out to be a significant betrayal of identity, and undermine the actual mission of the church:

The more the Church is treated as an organization, the more its mission becomes focused on techniques designed to maximize output and productivity. We become obsessed with quantity instead of quality, and where we have a care for quality, it is only to serve the larger goal of increasing quantity. The Church moves to becoming a managed machine, with its managers judging their performance by growth-related metrics (Guder, 2015, p. 37).

Yet all the while we continue, at least in the Church of England, to shouts of "growth, growth growth!". The emerging cognitive dissonance is serious, but we should not be surprised at its appearance in a body now being run as a hegemonic organisation, in which rationality and management have come dominate. The organisation, and its workers, have become tools of mechanistic management to maintain and increase production. This new system, to function, requires a constant diet of good news that raises morale and might conceivably increase production.

Jung Chang, in her award-winning *Wild Swans* (London: Collins, 2003) – a withering critique of Mao's China and the doomed Great Leap Forward – offers a parable that is a cautionary tale. She writes of a time when telling fantasies to oneself as well as others, and believing them, was practised to an incredible degree. Peasants moved crops from several plots of land to one plot to show Party officials that they had produced a miracle harvest. Similar 'Potemkin fields' were shown off to gullible – or self-blinded agricultural scientists, reporters, visitors from other regions, and foreigners. Although these crops generally died within a few days because of

untimely transplantation and harmful density, the visitors did not know that, or did not want to know.

She continues by explaining that a large part of the population was swept into this confused, crazy world. “Self-deception while deceiving others” (*zi-qi, qi-ren*) gripped the nation. Many people – including agricultural scientists and senior Party leaders – said they saw these miracles themselves. Those who failed to match other people's fantastic claims began to doubt and blame themselves. Many grass-roots officials and peasants involved in scenes like this did not believe in the ridiculous boasting, but fear of being accused themselves drove them on. They were carrying out the orders of the Party, and they were safe as long as they followed Mao. The totalitarian system in which they had been immersed had sapped and warped their sense of responsibility. Even doctors would boast about miraculously healing incurable diseases. She concludes:

Trucks used to turn up at our compound carrying grinning peasants coming to report on some fantastic, record-breaking achievement. One day it was a monster cucumber half as long as the truck. Another time it was a tomato carried with difficulty by two children. On another occasion there was a giant pig squeezed into a truck. The peasants claimed they had bred an actual pig this size. The pig was only made of papier-mâché, but as a child I imagined that it was real. Maybe I was confused by the adults around me, who behaved as though all this were true. People had learned to defy reason and to live with acting (p. 194).

Giant papier-mâché vegetables and livestock are not so very different from giant papier-mâché representations of churches and revivals. Their purpose is to excite and motivate. In the meantime, any remaining historic remnants of the established institution are subjected to intense bombardment. Their very right to exist is subject to frequent interrogations. Parishes – do we really need them? Let's disinvest in those, and set up lots of new initiatives like Fresh Expressions and Cell Churches. Expensive established theological colleges and courses? We can train clergy in new ways, cheaply and locally. Do we really need our churches and clergy? We can do all of this with cost-free lay-led home groups.

In Mao's China, these kinds of initiatives ultimately led to the Communist Party resorting to spouting meaningless slogans which they themselves knew made no sense. As the philosopher Roger Scruton argued, Marxism became so cocooned in what Orwell once called 'Newspeak', that it could not be refuted:

...facts no longer made contact with the theory, which had risen above the facts on clouds of nonsense, rather like a theological system. The point was

not to believe the theory, but to repeat it ritualistically and in such a way that both belief and doubt became irrelevant... In this way the concept of truth disappeared from the intellectual landscape, and was replaced by that of power. (Anne Applebaum in conversation with Roger Scruton, June 6th 2012, in A. Applebaum, *The Iron Curtain*, London: Allen Lane, 2013, p. 494).

Scruton added that once people were unable to distinguish truth from ideological fiction, however, then they were also unable to solve or even describe the worsening social and economic problems of the societies they ruled. Put plainly, I don't think we want the church to be run by 'visionary' ecclesiocrats who keep setting hard-pressed clergy and congregations ever-greater numerical and financial targets in a gloomy climate of ecclesionomics.

Like a Maoist culture of old, the Church of England is now being asked to assent to another Great Leap Forward (i.e., 'growth, growth, growth...'). In Mao's China (1949–76), it was not good enough to profess to be a good Communist and loyal Chinese citizen. Chinese Communism was turned into a cult of personality followership: to survive and prosper, you had to demonstrate that you were a *loyal disciple* of Mao. Because Communism was simply too broad to police, and China far too diverse to control, Mao set additional tests of orthodoxy to be sure of whom he could really trust. In the end, the only ones left were those who truly followed him: the obeisant. The parallels in the current state of the Church of England are striking.

Hannah Arendt, our foremost scholar of totalitarianism, noted that totalitarianism in power invariably replaces all first-rate talents, regardless of their sympathies, with those crackpots and fools whose lack of intelligence and creativity is still the best guarantee of their loyalty. That is part of the reason why Donald Trump got away with so much. He once said: "I value loyalty above everything else, more than brains, more than drive and more than energy".

Trump's exultation of personal loyalty over expertise is exactly what we see in the Church of England today. Dissent is not tolerated. No voice can be raised in protest. General Synod and Diocesan Synod are primed to emasculate criticism, deflect questions, and mute dissent. All Bishops are now 'on message', signed up to the Maoist-Capitalist vision of the Great Leap Forward with the mixed, fluid economy of the church giving free rein to those with the power and wealth to make the changes they want. This is now our Cultural Revolution in the Church of England: "let a thousand flowers bloom".

The Great Leap Forward (Part Two) **The Church of England's Growth Fetish**

The premise of the Church Growth Movement was simple: any enlargement is unquestionably good. Correspondingly, all available resources and thinking are placed at the disposal of such reification, in the wider cause of mission and ministry. Any conversation about proportionality (or obesity) cannot compute. Size matters; biggest is best; increase is indisputably the purpose of the church.

The missiology and ecclesiology of the Church Growth Movement are typically shaped by a cocktail of rational-pragmatic thinking. In the McDonaldization of the church, this is the “go large” constituency. Thus, any kind of science, engineering, management consultancy, marketing, selling, marketing, group dynamics, communications – to name but a few – have an inordinate influence over the theological and spiritual character of the evangelistic programmes and any resources for multiplication. C. Peter Wagner expressed the growth-size worldview-horizon so typical of the time with remarkable clarity:

Church growth is that *science* which investigates the planting, multiplication, function and health of Christian churches...Church growth strives to combine the eternal theological principles of God's Word concerning the expansion of the church with the best insights of contemporary social and behavioral sciences, employing as its initial frame of reference, the foundational work done by Donald McGavran.... (see Eddie Gibbs, ‘The Relevance of Church Growth Principles to Evangelism’ *The Churchman Journal: An International Journal of Theology*, Vol. 95, 1981, pp. 227-248 and C. Peter Wagner, *Your Church Can Grow*. Glendale, Calif.: Regal Books, 1976).

Wagner, McGavran and Wimber’s approaches to church growth were, in effect, blended pragmatic tips and insights, spliced together with relatively simplistic and highly partial hermeneutical readings of New Testament approaches to mission. It is functionalist too, which partly explains why the Archbishop can speak of Jesus being trapped in the church, and only met on Sundays when people worship. A missional pneumatology would see this very differently: Jesus outside the church, calling us out. It is we who are trapped. Jesus did not grow churches (or synagogue congregations). He was out and about embodying the Kingdom of God. Little of Jesus’ ministry led to large stable followings that developed into congregations. Sometimes, following Jesus – and becoming like him, the body language of God – was repellent to the world, and utterly estranged from any kind of popularity and numerical growth. Faithfulness is quite different from success.

Therefore, turning church growth and multiplication into a spiritual and ecclesial fetish is something to be resisted. The church is for fidelity, charity, love, peace, blessing, goodness, kindness, compassion, care and service. In terms of orthodoxy, numerical growth has never been a priority that trumps the body of Christ, and being faithful to our calling to love God and love our neighbours. Karl Barth – no doubt one of the ‘theological resources’ available at the Gregory Centre for Church Multiplication – argued in *Church Dogmatics* that it was heterodox to strive for growth. He stated that if the Church and its mission is used only as a means for getting larger, the relationship with God will lose its meaning and purpose. Barth reminded his readers that the fruits of our spiritual life are in God’s hands.

So why do we have this obsession with growth at all costs, such that care, compassion and morality are now denigrated in support of numerical increase? I think the socio-psycho-pathology of this amongst evangelicals is actually rooted in fear and anxiety, and growing cognitive dissonance. Performance in evangelism and mission is not what it was (but was it ever?). The much-touted stimulants enabling greater evangelistic greater virility – so many new initiatives over the decades, we have lost count – that we are left with that sense of talk of victory being hollow, inauthentic, and probably untrue. An anxiety about size and performance lies at the base of this, and it strikes me as gendered concern – mostly masculine – that fuels the fretfulness, even though it is garbed in quite different rhetorical clothing.

Yet I sense a deeper pulse in this latest iteration of the Church Growth Movement. For sure, it is Maoism and Capitalism spliced together, as one might expect in the early years of the 21st century. Indeed, “let a thousand flowers bloom” might be the new strapline for the Church of England. But growth has become a fetish; a sublimated form of sexual desire in which gratification is linked to an abnormal degree of craving for a particular object, which in this case is growth for the sake of growth. I detect an emerging ‘ecclesierotica’ (or possibly ‘ecclesiaporn’) in the body of the church; and this is why excitement and stimulation have become so easily sanctioned as the new ‘desiderata’.

The Gregory Centre for Church Multiplication is a kind of Pleasure Palace for those who might gain some semblance of quasi-sensual gratification, even carnality, invested in a rhetoric of fecund numerical growth. The language of “release” which underpins this suggests something more in line with the sociologist Rollo May diagnosed in some forms of self-inflating religion. We are dealing, suggested Rollo May, with “masturbatory surrogates”. The vision of a teeming, fertile and fluid church is on hand to supplement those who require their ecclesiology to be configured through endless excitements, thrills and stimulation.

If you are not excited and stimulated by the thought of 10,000 new lay-led church plants coming over the horizon, you are likely to find yourself narrated as flat and passive in your faith, or perhaps even ‘dead’. In this rhetorical bubble, the only valid and vital signs of life are perpetual intimate intensity, passion and exhilaration, leading to growth.

Now, you might be a tad uncomfortable with the appearance of a sexually fecund motif in this discussion. But we would do well to remember that almost thirty years ago, Bishops David Pytches and Brian Skinner co-authored their *New Wineskins* (Guildford: Eagle Books, 1993), and argued for new structures and similar kinds of “release” for the Church of England. Famously, they dubbed the parish system as “the condom of the Church of England”. They recommended disposing of the parish system – an over-used prophylactic, they argued – so that the “new wineskins” could emerge. (Yes, I realise that what the Gregory Centre is therefore offering are old wineskins, re-used). These new forms of church were based around the principles of “signs, wonders and church growth” championed by John Wimber, Peter Wagner, David Pytches and their followers, with cell churches dedicated to the multiplication of miracles which it was asserted would herald a “wave” of revival the like of which had not been seen before.

Little of this came to pass. The type of church growth advocated by Wimber, Pytches and Wagner turned out to be self-absorbed with manifestations of eclectic and charismatic power, which led a number of churches down specious rabbit holes such as the Kansas City Prophets, and the ‘Toronto Blessing’. As then, so now. The church is treated as a passive, slightly past-it bride. But fear not. For if you lie back and think of Jesus, the spiritual romance can be instantly re-invigorated. The spark will return. There will be growth – abundant and fecund – and it will be yours.

I am concerned at this point about the politics of consent. The propagators of this growth-talk cannot seem to accept the indifference of the rest of the church – or even a reasoned and critical “no thanks” – as any kind of legitimate response. The assumption is that no reasonable church or sane Christian could possibly refuse the advances of a suitor with such winning chat up lines. Surely “no” means “maybe”; and all they need is more time before you cave in and say “yes” (with enthusiasm). To be sure, those promoting such advances to the church are well-intentioned. Yet I wonder if they have actually understood the basic rules of attraction; to say nothing of consent, taste and difference.

Here, to be frank, many of our churches and Christians are not persuaded by this vision of mechanistic fecundity. In the same way, not everyone enjoys painting by numbers, or join-the-dots puzzles. If we all agreed that the world and the churches

could be sorted out and improved by such simplistic diagrammatic approaches to mission and evangelism, we might be persuadable. Just. But most are not converted by such approaches. We suspect such initiatives may be non-consensual in orientation, and possibly even harmful. No-one thinks painting-by-numbers is the same as the art or beauty it purports to represent.

The ecclesierotica that emerges in current and previous iterations of the Church Growth Movement is normally found in stories, anecdotes and testimonies. In using the term ‘erotica’ here, I mean material that is intentionally stimulating and arousing. The lines between pornography and erotica will vary across times and cultures. However, it would be reasonable to separate out pornography as the graphic depiction of sexually explicit scenes – often involving the actors in scenes that are objectifying, debasing and demeaning. In contrast, erotica will usually seek to tell a story that involves sexual themes that include a more plausible depiction of human attraction and interaction than would ever be present in pornography.

Erotica will not usually rely on the face or figure being portrayed as anatomically correct (i.e., in art, writing, etc.). Nor will it matter much if the portrayal is realistic, impressionistic or expressionistic. If the work has been erotically conceived, it is generally assumed that the creator viewed the subject matter as praiseworthy. What is then viewed, read or heard will be something to take pleasure in, celebrate, exalt or even glorify. And in this sense, the erotic and the aesthetic will often merge.

As all art is interpretive, the erotic as a subject within art is no different. Eroticism represents some form of beauty (albeit in the eye of the beholder), and is intentionally alluring. A lot of our spirituality is erotic – from the *Song of Songs* to the metaphysical poems of John Donne or Andrew Marvell. But if I am right about the sublimated sexual motifs in church growth-related rhetoric, I suspect that the type of quasi-erotica we are seeing here is far closer to the pole of the pornographic.

Pornography leaves little or nothing to the imagination. The primary goal is to ‘turn on’ the viewer or reader, and quickly. It is less evocative or suggestive than erotica. The strategy, in footballing terms, is of the direct ‘route one’ sort. There is no passing game; and no patient complex build-up in play. It is just a case of hoof the ball up-field, whack it in the box – and bang, goal! Likewise, porn is crudely simple, direct and straightforward titillation, resulting in immediate and intense arousal. No awkward relational contexts are needed, let alone the messy contingencies of dating and courtship. The goal is instantaneous stimulation.

Differences between erotica and pornography might help explain how and why the excitement and stimulation of 10,000 new lay-led churches lands differently within our ecclesial constituencies. Erotica will typically portray its subjects in ways that

focus on inner and outer radiance, and can celebrate fleshly vitality. Erotic art and writing are often passionate and powerful affirmations of life and unselfish pleasures.

Pornography, in contrast, will reduce the person depicted to their functioning body parts, with beauty subordinated to the overriding purpose of instant arousal. The sexual acts depicted will invariably be depersonalized, and will often be selfish or non-mutual in character. Where depictions of sex contain no sign of human caring, emotional connectedness or moral awareness, that suggests – to me at least – something is more towards the pole of pornography than to erotica.

In a nutshell, these represent some of my concerns for the ‘vision’ of this fecund, passionate virility implied by 10,000 new lay-led churches from the Gregory Centre for Church Multiplication. It has the feel of instant gratification; of crossing the line between slow-burning inspiration and expectation on the one hand; and on the other, instant arousal and gratification. And it seems to be promoting a mechanistic blueprint for the church that reduces the Body of Christ to matters of size and performance. It objectifies the body of the church to some functioning-fecund parts, and in the process removes their authentic unique human and social personalities – and their local, character and culture – and replaces them with predictable narratives of contrived interactions and instant gratification. The illustrative narratives and testimonies will always have a happy conclusion. The end-game of ecclesiaporn is release, and has similar properties to its secular counterpart.

Gordon Oliver, writing in *Ministry Without Madness* (London: SPCK, 2012) had this to say:

This, with major changes in church economics, all leads to a much more ‘managerial’ culture in relationships between clergy and people and between clergy and those who call and lead them. This in turn leads to reinterpretations of the basic dynamics of ministry practice so that many clergy are coming to see their work, and even their personal spirituality, as an unending series of project management exercises (though they rarely express it explicitly in these terms). This kind of cultural and institutional development is likely to have a strong influence on the way we think and therefore the way we speak about the people we lead and serve. If this ‘project management’ dynamic of ministry is allowed simply to continue without being subjected to careful theological reflection, it can suck the spiritual guts out of the clergy as well as of the churches they lead. The ‘language’ of the gospel and the language of those who lead in ministry can become foreign tongues of each other without anybody really noticing that it is happening... (p. 31).

Mao’s Great Leap Forward turned out to be a leap in the dark; and then it pitched the nation into a very deep abyss. It plunged China into decades of despair, with internecine competition for diminishing resources, violence between neighbours and

villages; with the totalitarian regime resisting external help, and slavish loyalty prized above the wisdom, skills and education that could have gone some way to resolving the problems the nation faced. Researchers, educators and professionals were all annihilated by shrill and ever-louder propaganda. Or just annihilated. As Jung Chang recalls, the people were constantly told that their survival and prosperity lay in their own hands. The people, the *laos* (laity) – not the politicians or the experts on agriculture, infrastructure, water, health, utilities – would sort this.

Thus, the answer to famine was to preach directly to the people: plant more and eat less. But with no fertilizer available to make the soils productive, the seeds perished. The dearth of agricultural machinery was blamed on the lack of steel. So, somewhat risibly, all households were encouraged to melt down their woks, kettles and kitchenware, and make their own steel. As any engineer will tell you, melting a few tin pots and scraps of metal will not contribute much to the steel production of a nation. Millions starved.

All the while, Mao proclaimed “let a thousand flowers bloom”. The resemblance to “10,000 new lay-led churches” is uncanny. It smacks of the government telling their citizens there is no more money, so fix your own social and community problems. Not enough money to run schools? Get some volunteers in – anyone can teach. People will gladly give their time for free; and ministry can’t be any different, can it?

So the closing words go to the satirist and critic writing under the name of Archdruid Eileen, and website (*The Beaker Folk of Husband Crawley*). In “Free from Limiting Factors” the article imagines what it might be like if 10,000 new science laboratories had just been announced by the government (see <https://cyber-coenobites.blogspot.com/2021/07/free-from-limiting-factors-10000-new.html>).

We read the following (from Saturday, 3 July 2021):

The establishment of 10,000 new, non-expert-led laboratories in the next ten years is among the ambitious targets that will be discussed by the Wellcome Trust. It also envisages the doubling of the number of children doing brain surgery by 2030.

The initiative has been christened “Brilliant” by Professor Branestawm, of the Institute of Dodgy inventions and Groupthink. Professor Branestawm explained how Brilliant would result in a million new scientists, operating from someone's front room:

“Labs led by people who fancy having a go release science from key limiting factors. When you don't need a proper lab, to pay the scientists, and long, costly education for nuclear physicists, then we can release untrained people to just crack on and do stuff with whatever kit they

can knock up. In lab-planting, there are no safety standards. I mean, passengers.”

Professor Branestawm has been testing this theory by talking to other scientists. There is some work to be done, he admitted, in ensuring nobody actually created dark matter and destroyed Croydon.

Many of the 10,000 labs would start small, and some would remain as 20 or 30 self-taught scientists working from someone's front room. Professor Branestawm broke off to appeal for people with enormous front rooms to come forward. But he said the definition of laboratory was “tight”. There must be at least one drunk bloke who everyone works round, and a spare lab coat and safety glasses in case Boris Johnson pops round.

As a mushroom cloud formed over Chipping Pagwell behind him, Professor Branestawm said, “we must avoid this initiative being seen as ‘just another initiative’. Which is why we're calling it a ‘vision’, which is entirely different. Not the same thing at all. The important thing about this vision is that, when we've stripped talented people out of existing labs to found new labs in people's sheds with no equipment, it's not my fault that the existing labs fail because they've lost key staff, and the new ones explode because Mrs Jones managed to split the atom in the Hoover. No, it's your fault because you didn't believe enough.”

Archdruid Eileen is half right. I do believe in Jesus enough, and what he calls us to do. I just don't believe in these preachers who are proclaiming yet another new Great Leap Forward. This is just another costly exercise in our leaders experimenting with the people, and gambling resources on another vacuous vision. These are vanity projects. Our leaders will never pay the price for their folly. We will. For our church, I think it is high time for a change of leadership. And to usher in our own very different Cultural Revolution.

Modern Church, 07-07-21