

WANTED - ANOTHER REFORMATION

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I have worked for almost ten years in the Anglican diocese of London. When I arrived the unspoken but pervasive assumption was that much of London was over churchd. The task therefore was to be patient and simply allow frail congregations to become even more fragile, so that the suggestion that their church should be closed would come as no surprise and possibly with some relief.

However, over the last ten years this implicit strategy has evaporated because of the ability of clergy to build up congregations. To begin with it was assumed that this ability belonged to the occasional gifted clergyman, then it was thought to be an art associated particularly with evangelicals, but now the catholic wing of the church has growing congregations as well.

Over the last ten years energy has been flowing back. Congregations of 20 or even less have now grown to 60 or even 90. The vast majority of parishes have become viable in the sense that Diocesan quotas are met, buildings maintained - and my wages are paid.¹¹⁷ Such congregational growth can mask the need to question what the priorities for the church should be in a post-modern (as opposed to secular) context. The identification of such priorities has major implications for the role of the clergy because of:

The sombre recognition that investment of time and effort in the institutional and local church does not equate to an investment in a full Gospel agenda. In a post-modern context, ministering solely to and through a congregation overlooks many new and diverse opportunities for mission.

The significant amount of discretionary time available to stipendiary clergy in the light of the reduction in the number of 'occasional offices' they are required to undertake. Unless clergy

¹¹⁷ In 1997 the number of confirmations which took place was 2,290, compared with 1,813 in 1987. In 1997 the number of people on electoral rolls was 55,000 compared with only 50,500 in 1987. In 1997 giving amounted to £17,924,804 compared with £8,625,000 in 1987, in real terms i.e. taking account of inflation, this represents a 35% increase in giving.

have a clear - and radical theory of mission around which to organise their priorities, the demands of the institutional church will lay claim to an increasing amount of their time and energy.

In London Diocese it is an achievement that church membership has increased and commitment deepened, especially as London has been viewed as the most secular place in the land. However, London is secular no longer, it is post-modern. One of the differences is that in a post-modern context, people are far more likely to be interested in things religious than in the chill days when Northern Europe was in the grip of frosty secularism. This means that our current post-modern environment offers myriad opportunities for mission. However, the challenge to the church as an organisation is that such opportunities exist outside our churches and furthermore, they do not easily translate into church attendance.

In a post-modern context people of faith are likely to be treated with genuine curiosity and interest. This contrasts sharply with the secular days when Christians were regarded as part of a remedial group which had failed to keep pace with the enlightened majority. In a post-modern context it is legitimate to have religious beliefs, however if such beliefs are to have a positive impact they need to be characterised by authenticity. As a way of coping with the multiple and rival values which exist side by side, the tool which is used for discernment is that of authenticity. Respect, if not credence, is ceded to those who are judged to exhibit authentic belief. This means that we who call ourselves Christian are judged not by whether we go to church regularly or make open profession of our faith, but by the extent to which we act on what we believe.

To add to the complexity which faces churches, in a post-modern context established institutions are likely to be treated with disdain. This means that statements which are issued by religious institutions at best are treated as optional, or worse, dismissed as vacuous. The authority of those representing institutions has withered and little recognition is given to the possibility that institutions can make a positive contribution to both personal and communal life. In this kind of environment a strategy of introducing people to the Gospel by encouraging them to attend church is likely to be only modestly productive. However, by engaging with people independently of the institution the scope for mission is widespread.

In a post-modern context the challenge is to help people discern and relate to the Holy. In particular, it is possible to help people to sense the active presence of a gracious loving God in their lives and to respond to that presence by becoming committed to the struggle to bring this world closer to God's longing for his creation. Take for example 'Holy Joe's', hosted by Dave Tomlinson in a South London pub. This provides an opportunity for people to explore their religiosity and to glean insights from the Christian faith. There is no expectation that such exploration will translate into church attendance, but the intention is that people will be developing a more coherent faith, recognising the significance of Jesus and develop a more purposeful relationship with God.

The opportunities for similar reflection groups are widespread. For example, in an area of urban regeneration, a reflection group could be hosted by the clergy, possibly over lunch, to encourage people to share their hopes and concerns for the regeneration programme. The discussion could culminate in a guided meditation (prayer) which gathered together the issues people raised. It is necessary to openly acknowledge that each person may have a different understanding of what is going on in such a process, but this can be done confidently, with the awareness that the significance of voicing our longings and concerns in an honest and unrestricted way has an integrity which the vast majority will recognise.

In relation to the growing emphasis on capacity building (helping people to make a more confident contribution to their local community and to civil society) the time is ripe for the concept of forgiveness to be included alongside other themes such as assertiveness and power analysis. Our faith, more than any other, is built on forgiveness, and it becomes possible to help people to be freed from the debilitating impasse of hurt - and the desire to hurt in return. Forgiveness is an art which can be learned, and taught, as well as demonstrated, and this could be a distinctive contribution which could be made by Christian 'trainers'.

Now that research is demonstrating consistently that religious practice, particularly prayer, is good for you,¹¹⁸ there is also scope

¹¹⁸ See the work of: Harold Koenig et al. on the link between church attendance & blood pressure, *The International Journal of Psychiatry and Medicine*, Summer 1998; Michael Argyle *The Social Psychology of Religion* - 3rd ed., London, Routledge 1998; D.G. Myers *The Pursuit of Happiness*, London, Aquarian 1992; David Hay & Ann Morisy 'Reports of Ecstatic,

for more chaplaincy work outside the church. The legitimacy of 'doing business with your God' is now accepted, to the extent that it is becoming an accepted clause in equal opportunities policies that people should have the right to embrace their faith actively and openly without fear of discrimination. Imagine the scope for chaplaincy associated with a railway or coach station - inviting people to share their concerns and praying with them about these things. And at risk of sounding banal, imagine the scope for chaplaincy at Battersea Dogs Home - enabling households who have lost and found to hold before God their hopes and fears.

Chaplaincy such as this becomes possible because in a post-modern context it is appropriate to assume that people pray. Likewise, people today are far more likely to admit to having had a religious experience - a time when they sensed God being especially close to them. This fact¹¹⁹ should come as no surprise, for if we believe that our God is a loving, truly gracious God, then we must anticipate that his footmarks are to be discerned throughout his creation. In the light of this it is wise for those of us contaminated by a once domineering church, to do as Gerard Hughes suggests: "To walk gently, because God will have walked there before".¹²⁰

Interestingly, it is the elements at the heart of priesthood which can travel most effectively within a post-modern setting. Whilst the calling to priesthood belongs to every Christian, in a post-modern context, there is a need for thorough literacy in relation to Christian theology and spirituality. The pervasiveness of sub-Christian and even pagan assumptions means that dialogue can easily drift into collusion unless the principles of the Christian faith are deeply understood. A key priestly task is to help people unfurl their previously unrecognised and unarticulated faith. This may involve providing people with the conceptual tools and language which can help them to make sense of their religious sensitivity. This has become a vital task now that so many people

Paranormal or Religious Experience, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 17(3), September 1978; Dan Blazer & Erdman Palmore 'Religion & Aging in a Longitudinal Panel', *The Gerontologist*, 16(1) 1976; Andrew Greeley *The Sociology of the Paranormal*, London, Sage 1975.

¹¹⁹ David Hay & Ann Morisy 'Secular Society/Religious Meanings: A Contemporary Paradox', *Review of Religious Research*, 26 (3) 1985.

¹²⁰ Gerard Hughes, quoted by M. Matthews in *Finding Your Story*, London, DLT, 1992.

have lost their religious literacy as a result of the dim and dark days of secularism.

In writing as I have, I struggle with the fact that I have been inclined to down play the role of the local church. The reason why I have not promoted the interests of the local church is that it, like any institution, whether local or national, cannot avoid being dominated by self-interest. This is not something to condemn, it is simply a fact of our corporate existence. The propensity is for those who gain most from the status quo to become more and more committed to the maintenance of the status quo. The hard fact is that in a post-modern context the local church is a necessary but not sufficient base from which to undertake effective mission. This means that for the sake of sharing the Gospel, we cannot allow local churches to monopolise scarce resources in the way that they currently do. In all the established denominations the payment of clergy to run local churches is by far the largest item in their budgets.

In a post-modern context few people are willing to give allegiance to an institution, therefore working to achieve regular church attendance and involvement will never be an adequate strategy for evangelism. In a complex fast moving culture it is not sufficient to grow a congregation from 25 to 95, regardless of how pleasing this may be to church authorities. Rather we need diverse approaches which can engage with disparate settings. The challenge is to set ourselves free from our fixation on congregational growth as the main strategy for evangelism, we need to be rigorous and begin to question whether such a fixation speaks of the self-interest of those on the inside of the church (and colluded with at all levels). Whilst ever we are under the sway of such unquestioned policy, scant resources will be released to enable solid engagement with the opportunities for mission which exist outside our churches. We also need to consider whether the mainstream denominations should invest more purposely in skills other than those of the clergy if they are to respond imaginatively, and professionally to the opportunities for mission which are being presented by an increasingly post-modern world.

If the reality is that for many the notion of church has lost credibility, then the witness of individual Christians is critical. The challenge is two-fold: Christians need to recognise that in a post-modern context we can come out of the closet in which we

have sheltered from the cold blasts of a secular world, and secondly, we need to embrace active discipleship; thus enabling us to both declare our faith and be perceived as acting on what we say we believe.

In coming out of the closet Christians could do worse than learn from the gay community by adopting an 'Out and Proud' attitude. For the gay person, being 'out and proud' creates a foundation upon which to build an honest relationship with others. Such information is shared out of respect for the relationship with the other person, it is not about proselytising or enticing people into a similar lifestyle. Such an approach, characterised by concern for mutual respect and understanding, may be key to the witness of Christians in a post-modern environment.

However it is not sufficient for the Christian to be 'out and proud'. If curiosity is to develop into respect, and people's attitude to the Christian faith transformed, the 'out and proud' Christian must also be adjudged as someone who acts on what they believe. This means that in a post-modern context discipleship is essential. But this discipleship must count for more than just being a law abiding citizen who happens to go to church Sunday by Sunday and practises personal piety. Such behaviour in a post-modern context is in danger of simply being labelled as 'sad'. Discipleship which carries weight in the eyes of the post-modern onlooker is that which Karl Rahner describes as venturesome love.¹²¹ In a post-modern context, therefore, churches need to give their members more help with the task of being a disciple, and churches themselves need to be, and perceived to be, bound together by more than their ritualistic practices and theological systems.

In circumstances such as these, community ministry becomes increasingly important by enabling people to express venturesome love by providing opportunities for them to work as volunteers with homeless people, those suffering mental illness, those in debt, refugees, disaffected youngsters - the list is almost endless. The many projects which churches now run provide an appropriately supportive structure for involvement, in recognition that it is irresponsible to invite people to express venturesome love without ensuring some boundaries and oversight. Furthermore, such corporate commitment rescues discipleship from being a solitary

¹²¹ K. Rahner, *Theological Investigations XI*, London, DLT 1974

activity which over the years it has increasingly become. Discipleship in Jesus' day was very much a group activity.

A community ministry project can be a very effective way of attracting the involvement of people from outside the church. It can provide a stepping stone which can make the local church, and more importantly, the Gospel, more accessible to people. Furthermore, the experience can prompt them to reflect on issues to do with God, particularly their relationship with God and their own vulnerability. When we take the struggles and pain around us into serious and active account, people can surprise themselves in their ability to dig deeply into their long neglected faith, and find themselves drawing on unexpected resources and behaving increasingly as Christians.

The strength of the evangelistic strategy associated with community ministry is that people are invited to express discipleship. This strategy is very appropriate in a post-modern environment, where people collect for themselves, and at their own pace, the jigsaw pieces which they personally find helpful in their spiritual journey. This contrasts with our usual evangelistic endeavours, which aim to call people to belief - despite the fact that the plurality of belief, which characterises a post-modern environment, means that it is no longer realistic to expect to be able to tell another what to believe.

Since community ministry offers an effective way of helping people to do business with God and to live their lives closer to God's wish for them, and gives authenticity to Christian witness, it is vital that mainstream financial resources be invested in this strategy. This will involve the appointment of co-ordinators who can promote participation and implement all the required good practice associated with caring for those who need. They will also encourage people to reflect on the experiences associated with their involvement and help people to make links with Gospel stories. However, if community ministry is to be supported then we shall have to reform the way in which we deploy the limited resources which the denominations have available.

The reformation which we need must allow our network of churches to continue, and to flourish, but no longer will the network of local churches be permitted to consume such vast resources. In our previous secular days, the concern was how to meet the cost of paid clergy assigned to local churches. However, in

today's post-modern context, there is an additional dynamic – the opportunity cost of allowing so much of our resources to be tied up in Sunday by Sunday church attendance and church administration. The pressing issue is how to set ourselves free from the shibboleth of congregational growth as the primary method of sharing the Gospel. To help us do this we need to deploy our mission experts in researching the actual effectiveness of different strategies. The availability of hard information may be a useful way of encouraging the extraordinary generosity of spirit, at all levels of church life, if such a change of practice and policy is to be implemented.

This article is a call for honesty, for reformation becomes possible when people are prepared to face the truth. Honesty is needed amongst those of us who benefit from the status quo. We need honesty in owning the fact that many churches could be run satisfactorily by appropriately trained non-stipendiary people, and possibly thrive in the process. Certainly the highly successful Pentecostal movement has flourished in the hands of unpaid pastors, and Bishop Penny Jamison's experience in the Episcopal Church of New Zealand supports this as well. If we are honest we shall acknowledge that often we loiter within our churches because we don't know what else to do, not knowing with whom to connect and fearful of their response if we made contact. We need to be rigorous with ourselves and change those responses which are deep within us, which were formed by the repeated humiliation and rejection we have experienced during the sneering hostility of a secular society. Such rigorous honesty is essential if ever the self-serving institutional church is to diversify the way in which it deploys its financial resources away from congregations, in order to connect with the rich and ready contexts outside the Sunday by Sunday church.

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