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## **SAVING THE CHURCH OR SAVING THE WORLD?**

**Chris Skilton**

The title appears to present a pair of alternatives. Could it imply a church engrossed in internal divisions and disagreements about trivia whilst the world gets on with its business, able to leave religion happily playing in the corner? If that's a true picture then such a church deserves to slip painlessly away.

So how about "Saving the Church and Saving the World"? But which comes first - or could they operate alongside each other? Better still is "Saving the Church in order to Save the World" - better simply because it reflects the biblical imperative which permeates scripture, Old and New Testament. The covenant described in Gen 17 was made with one man, Abraham, but only in order that he could become the ancestor of a multitude of nations. The commission in Isa 49 is that the servant will be a light to the nations. The call in John's gospel is to mission in the name of the Father who sent the Son, who in turn sends the disciples into the world. Jesus' parting words to those who have been witnesses to the resurrection is that they should go and make disciples of all nations. The often misunderstood passage Rom 9-11 is about the (often neglected) calling of Israel to look outwards. The imperatives addressed to the people of God are only about their own well-being and the community of faith in order that they may look outwards beyond themselves.

Let me then suggest three areas of 'church saving' to be done; none for their own sake, but for how they might enable the church better to address the world.

### **1. Good ordering of church**

A significant part of my current work is about the good ordering of the life of the local church and the encouragement of good practice in ministry in south-west London. This is what Ministry Today is about too! It is not for its own sake, but for the mission and work of

the churches in the communities amongst which they minister. This includes some down-to-earth attention to church life.

Installing sound systems, for instance, is potentially a profoundly gospel activity. They're not to be put in so that the church can boast a better or more-up-to-date system than its neighbour, but quite simply so that those who come into the building can hear what's going on (even if the pillars prevent them from seeing!). The minister may have prepared the most telling and powerful sermon, or the church produced a compelling drama, but if it can't be heard, they've wasted their time!

Tinkering with the fabric of the building can be happy displacement activity and welcome distraction from the primary task of the church. But addressing these issues properly and with right motives can play a significant role in the church's work. I happen to work in a part of the country where there are few community buildings for education, leisure, companionship, nursery provision, or anything! Many of the churches here have developed and are working on significant projects to enhance and enrich impoverished communities by the provision of space for a variety of needs. The church building is the only suitable building in the area. Is it more appropriate to preserve as it is a Victorian barn capable of holding 700 or to see how the church can serve the world by adventurous development and use of its resources?

Similarly, the sharing of good practice in ministry aids the mission of the church. Many are doing good, innovative and exciting things. They are not necessarily on the grand scale that merits a book, a video or a new course which will solve all our problems. But they may be well shared and offered in clergy chapters and fraternal, synods and Churches Together meetings. Too many areas of ministry are either jealously guarded as if they are 'ours', or received uncritically as that which will guarantee our success. Neither way of thinking honours the commission and calling of the church. A little less need to compete with the neighbouring church, a little less jumping on the latest bandwagon to impress our friends and a little more openness, honesty and commitment to the best of ministry - shared and worked on together - will go a long way. *Ministry Today* is an excellent place to share and disseminate some of that in this journal and its conferences. Save the church in its practice and structures in order to save the world!

## **2. Good connections between faith and life**

Ask most church-goers on a Monday morning what they did over the weekend and they will probably answer: "Nothing much - just the usual". This is not a flattering reflection of their feelings about the worship they attended twenty-four hours previously. If those who have been in church have truly encountered Christ in Word and Sacrament, is this an adequate response?

This aspect of saving the church is about nurturing people to see the profound connection between corporate and personal worship and daily life. We are still not getting this message across. It goes against the culture of our day, of course, and that doesn't help. We choose the different components that will satisfy our lives and make a package of what will suit or enhance them. We are less willing to see life as a whole and profoundly interconnected. What we do when we go to worship should impact deeply on what we do at our place of work, in our homes, in our significant relationships, in our participation in the local and wider community, in our leisure pursuits and hobbies. Church will not have credibility in the world if it is presented as one lifestyle choice or one hobby amongst many that could be picked out. Christian faith is not like bird-watching, embroidery or stock-car racing - is it?

Church life can collude with this attitude. It is increasingly well documented that working life and concerns get precious little attention in the Sunday act of worship. They feature rarely in sermons or Bible-study/discussion groups. Note who is prayed for in intercessions in church - missionaries, the clergy, medical staff, teachers, the unemployed and possibly the rest. This will not do if our congregations are going to learn to relate faith to life. We cannot begin acts of worship telling people to leave behind all their cares and worries from the week and think nice thoughts about God. It is in the bringing of the issues and demands of the week that we will increasingly see how God in Christ touches and transforms all that we do.

### **Good relationships between people who disagree**

It doesn't take an expert to notice that there are profound disagreements within the church at the moment, most of the public ones focused on who is doing what in the bedroom with whom. There always have been and probably always will be differences. Much of the rest of the world is frankly bemused, puzzled and disdainful of this. So be it. However what the world has discovered is that the church is just like everyone else when it

comes to not seeing eye to eye - splitting hairs, getting cross, going off in a huff, claims and counterclaims. It's not a pretty sight.

I am not convinced that disagreement need be a bad thing; it can be deeply creative and energizing as well as profoundly destructive and draining. However, the manner in which Christians disagree could say a great deal to the world. After all, it's no big deal if we get on with people who are our friends and who think in the same way that we do. What might get noticed is how we get on with people with whom we significantly cannot agree. Are we gracious, temperate, reconciling? Do we listen to one another, do we care for each other, do we take one another seriously, and do we recognize our common bond in Christ? As far as good relationships are concerned do we need to see the church saved first in order that there is something real to offer to the world?

The calling of the people of God has always been to recognize the unique claim of God upon their lives in order that they might serve and speak to the world beyond themselves. In each of these areas of good ordering, good connections and good relationships there is huge potential for speaking to contemporary society. But there's a huge temptation to turn in on ourselves, contemplate our navels and self-destruct. Which way shall we go?

**Chris Skilton was Archdeacon of Lambeth and a Board Member of Ministry Today**

## **CARING FOR THE DYING & THE LIVING**

### **Stephen Henwood**

It was a warm, sunny late summer's day in 1993 as I walked into St Francis' Hospice to begin my appointment as the first full time chaplain employed by the hospice. Previously I had worked in a church based ministerial appointment coupled with a part time chaplaincy post at the local general hospital. A full time chaplaincy was a new venture and like most new employees I had mixed feelings of excitement and trepidation. I believed this was where God wanted me and now there was no going back. Eleven years later I have spent time reflecting on the eleven most significant lessons learned over those years.