

Getting real renewal of the Church



Alison Morgan writes

'Now, here, you see (said the Red Queen to Alice), it takes all the running you can do, to keep in the same place. If you want to get somewhere else, you must run at least twice as fast as that.'



Packaging reality

Someone remarked to us recently that if you take the new out of renewal you get real. Reality is indeed what we are aiming at; if renewal is about anything it's about getting in touch with God, the only real reality in the universe. And yet often it doesn't feel like that. For many, renewal is a matter of running faster and faster in order to stay in the same place, an exhausting process of disentangling the competing voices of tradition and change. For some, it's what happened yesterday, in the charismatic renewal of a previous generation, marked by the recovery of a missing dimension of spiritual vitality which was needed at the time – but now renewal is old hat, and it's time to move on. For others again, renewal is a package, a matter of becoming what a friend

of mine describes as 'culturally charismatic', a way of looking for a tried and tested way of becoming a fruitful church. For many, that works, just as it works to speak French in France; but for others it fails to articulate the reality of life in the communities which surround them – where there may not be a church at all. How *do* we get real, exactly?

Renewal has a pattern

We are, remarked Bernard of Chartres in the 12th century, like dwarves standing on the shoulders of giants. It's an image I like. We don't need to crack ourselves out to be anything in particular. It's not *who* we are, it's *where* we are that matters. History teaches us there is a complex relationship between the Christian Church and the society in which it is set, and from our vantage point on the shoulders of our forebears we are able to look not just backwards but also forwards, into places they could not see. And as we look over the hills and valleys of history, we find that getting real has meant different things at different times. Getting real for the Roman Church meant bringing life and hope into communities devastated by plague. Getting real for the 13th century Church meant taking vows of poverty and engaging with God in the context of a society obsessed with power and patronage. Getting real for the Church of the Enlightenment meant Wesley galloping round the country on horseback, bringing a living faith to a populace left cold by the rationalism of the ruling classes.

What then of us? I think we have to start by looking at the forms renewal has taken in the recent past. The last 100 years have been about the development of science and technology, about our ability to build and control and achieve. They've been about



war too, as we have lost touch in the process with much of our own humanity, vulnerability, and spirituality. We're perhaps sadder now, but wiser, as we begin to recognise what it is that we've cast aside. What has *renewal* meant, in the context of all this? It has meant getting back in touch with the only real reality, with the Lord, the giver of life, and coming to him one by one to be made real in our turn. It has meant allowing the water of life to land in us, and learning to let the ripples spread out into our churches.

There is a pattern to renewal, and what we have seen in recent times is its first two phases:

'Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.'

1 Peter 2: 4 - 5

Renewal in the first half of the 20th century meant allowing ourselves to be touched by the finger of God, to become living stones. Renewal in the second half of the 20th century meant allowing our churches to rediscover what it meant to be the body of

Christ, united and equipped for ministry. It still means both those things; but perhaps increasingly it means connecting with the community, and learning to be a holy but flexible priesthood in a society which knows something is missing, but doesn't know where to look to fill the void. Renewal is not yesterday's movement; renewal is only just arriving where it's meant to be.

Context matters

When everything is crumbling, then one is facing reality. *Augustine*

It follows that renewal of the Church is a work in progress; a work which we often hinder. It has been said that the renewal movement has suffered from three core problems: first, it has been socially monochrome; secondly, it has been expressed in ways which jar with some constituencies, and has become identified with particular styles and rituals; and thirdly, it has not taken Scripture seriously enough.¹ All these things have served to put people off, and to cause us to take our eyes off the bigger picture of God's engagement with us in the context of a world which has lost conscious touch with the Holy Spirit. For the first time in centuries we are seeing a sharp increase in spiritual awareness in the community – and we know from history that it is at such times of felt need that people are willing to turn to God. Renewal



is not just about us, or about our churches. Renewal is about the kingdom; renewal is for mission. Renewal comes because, as Cyprian put it 2000 years ago, God is building for himself a people – and many of those people are as yet outside the Church, doing a myriad different things in a

The ReSource vision is for

- a diverse patchwork of renewed and dynamic local expressions of what it means to be church, all over the country, and
- as the love of God flows out from each church, a spiritual and tangible consequence in the community.

Food for thought . . .

We will be in error.. if we try and freeze the work of the Spirit into the channels and forms with which that work was initially associated. If there is a key to renewal, it is to be found here; the foundation of the Church's life is to be found by exploring to the full the riches of God made incarnate in Jesus Christ through the agency of the Holy Spirit here and now *William Abraham*

In the process of the continual reformation in the life of the Church, Christians move on not through original and new ideas, but through rediscovering and refreshing our understanding of different aspects of our tradition which have become lost or neglected in a particular context *Steven Croft*

Historically, the most important ingredient of true reformation and renewal is for the church to become more intentionally biblical in its thought and actions *Gordon Fee*

You can't change the future without disturbing the present *General Booth*

In the short time during which I have been Archbishop, I have regularly been surprised and deeply heartened by the widespread sense that the Church of England, for all the problems that beset it, is poised for serious growth and renewal. Many feel that, as various streams of development over the past decade or so begin to flow together, we are at a real watershed *Rowan Williams*

society which require us to engage with them in a myriad different ways.

A patchwork world

One of the characteristics of the society in which we live is diversity. Not so much diversity of belief, perhaps, as diversity of expression, arising from the emphasis we place on choice. The greatest master and creator of diversity is of course God; and in the Church we are recognising that it is no longer helpful to offer uniformity in the way we express, develop and share our faith. In this issue of ReSource we have tried to capture something of the variety of the ways the Church is responding to this new context. Nicky tells the story of how her church is exploring pantomime as a means of engaging with the secularised community of a modern German town. Dave tells the story of the way the A Rocha movement is trying to bring people in touch with the God who breathes life into the wonderful world he created. Edward shows us on the front cover how our young people are prepared for risk and adventure, and how vital it is to offer them open horizons rather than an invitation to conformity. Diversity is all important. And yet we mustn't fall into the trap of thinking that diversity is in itself renewal. Renewal comes from somewhere else.

Identifying our resources

All genuine renewal begins and ends in receiving from the living God.

William Abraham

We do need to pay attention to the context in which we live, but we must be clear that the reason is to identify need, and not to find solutions; to find culturally accessible ways of expressing our faith, but to do that by looking

to the resources we have in the living God and not by jumping on the bandwagons of a world which doesn't know him. Renewal in history has come not by joining in, but by daring to be different. The nature of renewal within the Church will depend on what is going on outside the Church, in the culture which forms us; but the answers won't come from the outside, but from the resources we have within – the resources which flow from the living reality of God himself. We may express what we have received in new ways; but the reality we express will come to us in the old ways, through creative engagement with God through Scripture and in prayer – the ways that we as dwarves have inherited from the giants on whose shoulders we stand. It has been said that the Church will always spring back, because is the only institution which has the seeds of renewal built into it, seeds that are found in prayer for repentance and in renewed study of the word of God.² Our hope is that as we immerse ourselves in the source of life, we will be made real in ways which are recognised by those for whom we exist: those who as yet have no idea what riches are available to them in Christ. 

¹ Rowan Williams, in conversation with Martin and Cesca Cavender, May 2004.

² Os Guinness, 'Sounding Out the Idols of Church Growth', in O. Guinness and J. Seal (eds): *No God but God – breaking with the idols of our age*, Chicago 1992 See www.gospel-culture.org.uk

about the writer

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