

# What does the Gift of the Spirit mean for the Shape of the Church?

Alison Morgan

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## INTRODUCTION

Few people today would dispute that we are living through one of the great transitional periods of history, a time of unprecedented challenge and change. As a context-dependent institution, this inevitably requires the Church to undertake a radical reappraisal of its mission and ministry – a reappraisal which should properly begin with a discussion of the Holy Spirit who both initiates and sustains our shared spiritual life as the body of Christ. What can we learn from a study of the Holy Spirit which will help us to live our lives as Christian believers and witnesses in this changing cultural context? What insights may we gain about the gift of the Spirit from the story of creation and from the teaching of Jesus? What can we discover by looking at the relationship between Spirit and Church in the New Testament, in different historical periods since then, and in our own experience? And above all, can we pull out from all these things some guiding principles to help us reshape our mission and ministry for a radically different future? I suggest that we can.

However, fresh insights usually depend on fresh methodologies. Theological reflection is essential, especially at times of change; but if we are not careful it can become divorced from real life. Alister McGrath has written about our need to engage in what he calls organic theology – theology which links directly to the life and mission of the church. I would go further and say that I see a great need for embodied theology – theology which is rooted in our own experience. We live between the worlds of modernity and postmodernity, between a preference for the objective and a preference for the subjective. I am modern enough to prefer thinking and analysis as my main *modus operandi*, but postmodern enough too to know that we start from where we are at and tell our own stories – my faith is both conceptual and relational. If modern theology was sometimes an exercise in secular reductionism, postmodern theology is best seen as a conversation. I can only have a conversation as myself; and hope (with Henri Nouwen) that what I bring into that conversation is a function not just of who I am but also of where I am – as an individual within a context, a context which is shared.<sup>1</sup>

## IN THE BEGINNING: THE HOLY SPIRIT IN CREATION

The work of the Spirit begins not in the Church but in the world. And so it was that, knowing nothing of Christ or of his Church, I nonetheless found the Spirit in the world around me – in a giant stagbeetle encountered one day as a toddler in the garden; as I grew older, in the tiny football-rattle calls and bright red eyebrows of flocks of long-tailed tits, and the deep orange eyes of owls. For some, the sheer gratuitous variety of creation is evidence that there can be no creating and controlling God.<sup>2</sup> For me, the suspicion gradually grew that the opposite was the case. Could I explain the different reactions of garden birds as I held them in order to ring them? The astonishing variety of different shades and shapes of plant leaves on a single slope in the Canary Islands? The sight of the wind rippling over the silky golden heads of a field of ripe barley? Knowing nothing of Jesus' comparison between the wind and the Spirit, and unaware of Paul's words to the Romans that the invisible things of God can be understood through the things he has made, I first began to find the Spirit of God in the inexplicable mystery and variety of what I saw around me.

That was my beginning. What about God's beginning? Well, for God too the work of the Spirit starts, as Raniero Cantalamessa has noted, in the open air. Genesis 1 verse 1-2:

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.<sup>3</sup>

The wind is *ruach*, the Spirit of God. This same word means wind, spirit, breath. And in the movement of this Spirit the world was created, day and night, sun and moon, land and water, plants and birds and fish and animals and insects, and finally man. What characterises the world to which the Spirit of God gives birth as she sweeps over the waters at this moment of creation (the Hebrew word *ruach* is feminine)? It's diversity, and the whole of Genesis 1 bears witness to it. The world that is born is a model of extraordinary, and probably unnecessary, diversity; and this is what is striking about it. It's still there for us to see. And it is through this diverse world that we begin to know the Spirit of God - not in some abstruse or difficult way, but simply by opening our eyes. It indeed became commonplace from the earliest times, in a society where most could not read, for God to be apprehended in this way. Augustine pointed out that only the literate can read the book of scripture, while everyone can read from the book of the universe. The medieval mystics taught that prayer should begin with the contemplation of the created world, for there we find the footprints of God, the thoughts of God, the music of God. In the 13<sup>th</sup> century Aquinas said that the diversity of creation is necessary in order to bear witness to the nature of God, 'so that what was wanting to one in the manifestation of the divine goodness might be supplied by another'. Bonaventure taught his monks that 'God is contemplated not only *through* material things as footprints, but also *in* them, inasmuch as he is in them in essence, power and presence'. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century Calvin talked about God communicating himself to us through his created works. In the 18<sup>th</sup> Jonathan Edwards described them as God's shadow, as his voice or language. In our own times Pierre Teilhard de Chardin wrote about all things being animated by a single spirit, and finding himself, as he wandered among them, approaching the point where the heart of the world is caught in the descending radiance of the heart of God. The Spirit of God leaves her traces in the world she made, and it is there that we first find her.<sup>4</sup>

So the word *ruach* means wind, spirit, breath; the Spirit of God swept over the waters like a wind and left in her wake a created world of astonishing diversity. And in the very same movement, the Spirit of God breathed life into that world. So if the first thing we notice about the work of the Spirit is that she brings *diversity*, the second is that she brings *life*, the 'breath of life' as God puts it in Genesis 1.30 and again in 2.7. Life itself is a product of the Spirit. First the Spirit creates; then she breathes. As Job says, 'the spirit of God has made me, and the breath of the Almighty gives me life' (Job 33.4). The world to which the Spirit gives birth is not dead, not a painted canvas of carefully assembled still life; it's living, moving, breathing.

And as we read on we find it constantly stated in scripture that the Spirit not only breathed life into God's creatures at the beginning of time, but continues day by day to sustain that life with her breath. The best known passage is Psalm 104, a hymn to the continued dependence of the created world on the life-giving presence of the Spirit of God. Wolfhart Pannenberg summarises:

Every creature is in need of conservation of its existence in every moment; and such conservation is, according to theological tradition, nothing else but a continuous creation. This means that the act of creation did not take place only in the beginning. It occurs at every moment.<sup>5</sup>

So the Spirit of God brings life, and renews life. This too is a constant theme of scripture. The Spirit of God is daily at work to sustain and renew that which she has created. It is the Spirit of God who renews the ground and the grass, who sustains all creatures with her breath, who renews our strength and our days, our heart and spirit, and who one day will begin again with a new creation. The Spirit of God makes all things new, and it is on her that we depend in all that we are and do.<sup>6</sup>

What then do we take from this rapid overview of the role of the Spirit in the world? Two things. The world which is born as the Spirit sweeps over the waters is a diverse world. And it is a world which owes not just its initial life but its ongoing existence to the Spirit. The Spirit creates. The Spirit renews.

## THE TEACHING OF JESUS

Now that's all very interesting. But is it relevant to a discussion of the Church, or is it merely of historical interest, relating to the days of the Old Covenant when the Spirit was not available to us directly and individually? In the New Testament we move from an emphasis on the role of the Spirit in creating and renewing the physical world to an emphasis on his work in the spiritual world (switching from the feminine Hebrew *ruach* to the neuter Greek *pneuma*). Does this mean that the New Testament talks about the Spirit in other ways, and that it would be better to think about the relationship between the Spirit and the Church in those ways?

John begins his gospel with a deliberate echo of the opening words of Genesis 1, 'in the beginning': 'In the beginning was the Word... All things came into being through him... What has come into being in him was life.' The implication is clear. What is happening now in the person of Jesus is being said to be continuous, and not discontinuous, with what happened at the beginning of time. Spirit and Word are the two hands of God, working together; 'Spirit and Word belong together like breath and voice', Irenaeus said in the

second century. Throughout the Old Testament we see an interplay between Spirit and Word, present above all in the active speaking of the prophets, and often personified in the Wisdom tradition. Both these strands come to fullness now in the person of Jesus, the living Word.<sup>7</sup>

And if we turn to the teaching of Jesus, we find that he too drew frequently on the created world, in metaphor, simile and parable. We might assume that he did so because that is what is there, just as we often draw on illustrations from computers and technical processes. But perhaps there's more to it than that. Perhaps Jesus drew on the created world when teaching about the spiritual world not just because it was convenient, but because there is an intrinsic affinity between them - because created things, as visible manifestations of the Spirit of God, themselves embody spiritual realities. Paul said that we understand invisible things through looking at visible ones, and he himself taught that way.<sup>8</sup>

Theologians have warmed to the theme. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century Jonathan Edwards suggested that the visible world was designedly made and constituted in analogy to the more spiritual, noble, and real world, and that the signs and types in the book of nature are representations of spiritual realities. In the 1930s the biblical scholar Charles Dodd suggested in his study of the parables that Jesus' use of the created world arises 'from a conviction that there is no mere analogy, but an inward affinity, between the natural order and the spiritual order'.<sup>9</sup>

So when Jesus taught about the vine and the branches, the tree and its fruits, the mustard seed and the yeast, the wheat and tares, the farmer sowing his fields, the sparrow and the lilies, the fox and his hole, he regarded these things not so much as teaching aids as visible representations of spiritual principles. This, he says, is how things are.

What does this offer to us? Jesus had little to say about the Church, inevitably. But he had a great deal to say both about individuals and about the kingdom, and most of the examples I have just given relate to one or the other of these topics. The Church is just what comes in between; it's the community of those who are 'called out' of the world and into the kingdom of God - that's what the word 'church' means. Pentecostal theologian Gordon Fee defines the Church as 'an eschatological community', a kingdom community, a travelling community called by Jesus and dependent, just like the created world, on the indwelling presence of the Spirit within it as it moves towards an eternal destination.<sup>10</sup> It's a community which it is open to us to think and talk about as Jesus did, maybe in ways which differ from the ways we have grown used to thinking about it - for on the whole we have looked not to the created world but to the world of an industrialised human society for our illustrations; and perhaps that has influenced the way we do things.

## **THE HOLY SPIRIT IN THE NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH**

Let's move on, then, to focus on the Church itself - for the coming of Jesus inaugurates a new phase in the work of the Spirit. As Jesus is baptized, the heavens are torn open and the Spirit comes down. As Jesus is crucified, the dividing curtain of the temple is torn. Both events mark the crossing of a boundary, a boundary which hitherto had separated human beings from the direct presence of God. The Spirit is made

available to the community of believers, the people of God who will constitute the Church. And as we begin to follow the fortunes of the Church through the New Testament, we find that the relationship between Spirit and Church echoes the relationship between Spirit and creation. The Spirit breathed life into all living creatures at the beginning of time, and so now he breathes life into the Church at the beginning of this new era in human history. John 20.22, Jesus breathed on the disciples and said 'Receive the Holy Spirit'. Acts 2.2, 'suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind... All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit'. And as Tom Wright has pointed out, the Spirit given afresh on the day of Pentecost is the *same* Spirit who brooded over the waters of chaos at the beginning. The Spirit who hovers now over Jesus in the form of a dove is the *same* Spirit who hovered with pregnant intent over the world at the moment of creation. She, or he, is the Spirit from whom all life comes, life both physical and spiritual.<sup>11</sup>

It follows that the Church, like the world, is to be characterised by the presence of the Spirit within it. The Church, in other words, is to be a charismatic community. Often we instinctively define it as so much less than that. But the Church can *only* be defined by the presence of the Spirit within its members. 'In the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body', Paul tells the Corinthians. We are 'a letter of Christ, written ... with the Spirit of the living God'. Without the Holy Spirit, the Church is not church.<sup>12</sup>

As a charismatic community, we find that the Church is a diverse community. Diversity in unity is a major theme of the New Testament in relation to the work of the Spirit in the Church. The first thing that happens is that the gospel is announced in many languages to members of many people groups. Soon we see the coming together of people old and young, rich and poor, to share their lives and possessions as one. Paul's letters to the Ephesians, the Romans and the Corinthians speak of the members of the Church as members of a body, different in spiritual gifting but united in Christ. 'There are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit', who allots them individually as he chooses. It is noticeable that Paul offers no blueprints for church structure or organisation other than this single principle of diversity in unity through the presence of the Spirit. Roland Allen and Vincent Donovan have famously remarked how different this is from our own ways of planting churches. And we might note how different too this kind of diversity is from the diversity celebrated in our current culture, where diversity means little more than difference. The diversity we find among ourselves as members of this charismatic community which we call Church is a diversity which, like the diversity of the created world, holds together in a unity which comes from the constant presence within it of the Spirit of God.<sup>13</sup>

If diversity in creation was our first theme from the work of the Spirit in the Old Testament, renewal of that same creation was our second. And this holds true in the Church too. The word renewal has been sadly caricatured in recent times, but the New Testament bears constant witness to the role of the Spirit in bringing renewal of life to the newly called people of God – new life, new birth, new creation, new hope, a new self, new tongues, new gifts, new teaching, a new people, a new commandment, good news; the list is endless. And if Paul offers no organisational blueprint for the Church, he offers no relational law either – his appeals to those struggling with issues of discipline are always appeals to turn to the Spirit, in whom they will find the resources they need. It is noticeable that in the letters to the seven churches revealed to John, each time the Spirit is speaking of the spiritual, not organisational, life of the church in question –

and each time the message is different. I suspect that in our own churches the same will be true.<sup>14</sup>

## THE HOLY SPIRIT AND THE SHAPE OF THE CHURCH IN HISTORY

So the New Testament Church seems clearly shaped by the Spirit, diverse and yet unified, constantly renewed and resourced by his presence within it. It sounds simple; and yet history shows it is not. Diversity can easily slip back into chaos. The Spirit, like the wind, is hard to pin down and easy to misinterpret. We see the beginning of this process in Corinth, where diversity had obviously been grasped more readily than unity. The charisms were much in evidence in the Early Church, but by the 3<sup>rd</sup> century it was felt that things were getting a little out of hand – particularly with regard to the prophetic Montanist movement. Meanwhile creeds and liturgies were developed, and professional ministers grew in authority. Cyprian linked the charismatic gifts firmly with the office of bishop, and imperceptibly the wind of the Spirit became identified with the structures of the Church. The ascetic and monastic movements, and groups such as the Cathars, the Anabaptists, and the Quakers sought with varying degrees of success to keep the Spirit at the centre of their communities; but by and large as the years went by the Spirit became not so much a living presence as a metaphor, a kind of shorthand justification, for the decisions of the Church.<sup>15</sup>

Charismatic ecclesiologists do not mince their words when they reflect on this process. José Comblin states that by the 14<sup>th</sup> century the Spirit was confined to sacraments, councils and the authority of the Pope, and had long been invoked only as a prop for everything the hierarchical church had already decided. Jean-Jacques Suurmond remarks that if the Catholics imprisoned the Spirit in the Church, the Protestants imprisoned him in the Word, and suggests that Luther's failure to see the structure of the community of Christ as a charismatic one meant that the exciting rediscovery of the priesthood of all believers turned out in practice to mean little more than prayer and Bible reading at home. The Orthodox church fares little better, for there the Spirit is said to have become trapped in the sanctuary.<sup>16</sup>

It's undeniable that as time went on, the Church settled more and more into an ordered shape. It's customary to blame Constantine for the beginnings of this process, but the political struggles of the Middle Ages, the classical thought patterns of the Renaissance and the rationalist beliefs of the Enlightenment did nothing to disturb the pattern, and much has been written on the adaptation of the Church to the culture of modernity since then. Order was maintained – but the price of unity was to be, as so often before, the taming of apostles and the muzzling of prophets. The Pentecostal movement of the 20<sup>th</sup> century represents a serious attempt to break free from an ecclesiastical straitjacket and reintroduce the Spirit to the life of the Church, but often division and denominationalism have been the result. The whole process was summarised by Dutch theologian Hendrikus Berkhof when he wrote that 'to a great extent, official church history is the story of the *defeats* of the Spirit'.<sup>17</sup>

And yet perhaps it's not as simple as that. It's fashionable to knock institutions, for we live in an anti-institutional age. To distinguish between institution and Spirit is not always helpful, for institutions are what happen when people come together; the word means little more than 'something that is'. What matters is our willingness to allow the presence of the Spirit to bring change to our institutions, to shape and renew them. If there is a key to the renewal of the Church, William Abraham remarks, 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'. The traditions, canons and creeds of the church merely provide the context for such an exploration.<sup>18</sup>

And history does indeed show this happening repeatedly, as the Church struggles in different periods to respond to the ever changing missionary context in the culture around it. Alone of all human institutions, the Church has the seeds of reformation and renewal built into its DNA, for alone of all institutions it is able to respond to the indwelling presence of the Spirit of God through scripture and in prayer. It is the role of the Spirit to promote reform in the Church, to shape it and resource it, to help it be the incarnate body of Christ in the world in which it is set. And as Michael Riddell rightly says, we stand now in one of those closed epochs which calls for vision and reformation. No one expected 40 years ago that the Spirit would once again be playing a dominant role in the Christian faith, or that it would be a deeper event than the Reformation – but that is precisely what is being suggested now.<sup>19</sup>

## **THE HOLY SPIRIT AND THE SHAPE OF THE CHURCH TODAY**

What then of the Church today? How can we open ourselves to the patterns of diversity and renewal which have characterised the life-bearing work of the Spirit since the beginning of time?

Well, the modern world has not been a diverse world. Uniformity, not diversity, has characterised the period from the 18<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The modern world is a predictable world, dominated by centralised hierarchies, longterm planning, and confidence in human ability to manage the present and the future. It's a world in which change is initiated at the centre. Its key values have been recognised as efficiency, calculability, predictability and control. And in many ways these are the things which have come to characterise the Church. We have inherited uniform buildings, centrally provided liturgies and hierarchically determined structures and processes. For some these things provide a reassuring link to the past; but for an increasing number both inside and outside the Church they have become deeply unhelpful.<sup>20</sup>

And yet many of our attempts to bring ourselves up to date have been equally prescriptive, owing more to the secular culture than to the Spirit. Gothic buildings and Victorian pews have been replaced by converted warehouses and plastic chairs. Church growth literature offers new blueprints for missionary success. Copyrighted enquiry courses are available. Steven Croft has pointed to the way in which churches have unconsciously conformed to models of cinema, franchise, or unit of production, among others. So often we have tried harder, but not thought what we were doing.<sup>21</sup>

We went to a beautiful church on holiday in Norway - a brightly coloured modern stave church, all painted wood and welcome. They were having a family service and hoped to attract some new people. They'd composed a special song for children. They held a quiz. They followed the service with a wonderful barbecue in the snow. But only one family came. Our next holiday was in this country. Another family service. There was a drama on Abraham led by a professor of theology from Oxford. A special children's liturgy, but still 'thy kingdom come' and 'trespasses', and a song with a Latin title called the Sanctus. The

congregation was mostly retired; three children sat at the front and a baby cried at the back. We have to be more radical than this! 'We provide it and they join it' won't do any more, however carefully crafted our offering may be. It is, as Frost and Hirsch remark, no longer enough to take the car in for a service. It's time to revisit our whole transport policy.<sup>22</sup>

The world is moving on. We live now in a time which we have dubbed postmodernity, because in many ways it is a reaction to modernity. Postmodernity is characterised by decentralised networks, unpredictability, flexibility and uncertainty, and change is initiated at the periphery. It is a diverse, DIY and yet confused world; a world in which people are increasingly aware of the marginalisation of the spiritual, emotional and aesthetic side of life, and increasingly experimenting with alternative spiritualities in order to answer the cry of their souls. It's an it-must-fit-me world, a world in which truth claims are distrusted and authenticity is sought in experience. The last place most people now think of looking for answers to spiritual questions is the Church.<sup>23</sup>

Christian management guru Ken Blanchard observes that it is commonly asked, 'which approach is better - improving what is, or creating what isn't?' The answer he gives is 'Yes!'. And that is our challenge. We have 2,000 years of tradition and experience on which to draw, and we live in a culture which is willing to experiment. Some gloomy things have been said. But perhaps we can take advantage of these postmodern waters to swim in new and more creative ways, to pay new attention to the resources we find in scripture, and to open ourselves more fully to the presence of the Spirit among us – for Word and Spirit have always been inseparable partners in the self expression of God.<sup>24</sup>

To do that will mean to be willing not just to seek inspiration for the creation of a diverse Church, but also to allow the sustaining and renewing presence of the Spirit full reign in our lives; it will mean avowing our intent to be, in every way that we can, a genuinely charismatic community. The New Testament speaks of spiritual renewal in different ways, ways which have often been reduced to a restricted range of manifestations and expressed in increasingly predictable forms – charismatic renewal has become a bit of a subculture, if you like. Spiritual renewal, properly understood, should be a constant process, continuous as the flowing of fresh water, refreshing as a stream to the roots of a tree on parched land. It should be as fruitful as an orchard, as noticeable as salt in food and light in darkness, as inspiring as the building of living stones into a spiritual house which becomes a holy priesthood. Spiritual renewal is not an event which happens but a process which unfolds. And as a process, it has an outcome. God, said Cyprian in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, is building a people for his name. God is creating a kingdom. Rivers flow into the sea.<sup>25</sup>

What all this means is that one of the marks of spiritual renewal should always be an outward focus, a mission focus. A church which is diverse and being daily renewed is a mission-shaped church, a church which is going somewhere, a church which is genuinely an eschatological community, a kingdom community open not just to its current members but to those outside. 'As the Father sent me, so I send you' said Jesus as he breathed the Spirit upon the disciples. The Spirit of God is a missionary Spirit, active not only in the Church but also in the world.



## LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

Now to the big question. What might all that mean in practice?

It has sometimes been the Church's experience that the Holy Spirit can bring chaos. Diversity of gifting, role, and expression has at times in the Church's history almost overwhelmed her. So we tend, and we've done it spectacularly with the reinforcing ethos of modernism, to clip the Spirit's wings. The Church dislikes the consequences of immaturity, and maybe particularly so in England, where it's been remarked that we prefer slow evolutionary change, measured, discussed, weighted with checks and balances.<sup>26</sup> The Spirit of God, on the other hand, tears holes in heaven, and has a habit of descending with apparent total lack of discrimination on the most unlikely people. It's alarming stuff.

And yet if we return to Genesis, we find that the Spirit did not, as we fear, bring chaos into order, but rather order into chaos. It is precisely the misunderstanding that there is no alternative to order than disorder which has so often hampered our mission and ministry, and fuelled conservatism and institutionalism within the Church. Scripture shows the opposite trend at work. At the moment of the crucifixion, the sky darkens and the primordial chaos threatens once again; Jesus sends forth his spirit, and the universe regains its stability. In the microcosm of our own lives, chaos and confusion is similarly replaced by stillness and peace as we turn to Christ and welcome the Spirit to work within us. So it is that chaos is to be replaced, not by production-line uniformity, but by the pervading, organic, life-giving presence of the Holy Spirit. Only then is real growth possible.<sup>27</sup>

With that in mind, I'd like to propose four ways in which we might think about the gift of the Spirit and the shape of the Church.

### *A focus on Jesus*

Firstly we will need to focus on Jesus, through whom the gift of the Spirit has come to us. Our primary preoccupation should not be the Church, which is after all a transitional body, an outpost of the kingdom for travellers on the way, but Jesus. Maybe because this is such an anti-institutional age, I find myself spending less and less time thinking about Church and more and more time thinking about Jesus. I find increasingly within myself this question – who is Jesus, and what does it mean to allow the Spirit to bring him to life in me? It was after all through Jesus that the Spirit was given, and to Jesus that the Spirit bears witness.<sup>28</sup>

Others have felt the same. 'If ever there was a time to rediscover Jesus the Messiah, it is now', Frost and Hirsch suggest. 'It is possible that the story of Jesus may find a hearing once more, if it can be cleansed of its institutional accretions and retold in simplicity and honesty', Michael Riddell writes. 'Jesus emerged from the interviews with a good reputation', Nick Spencer reports from a series of discussions with people outside the Church.<sup>29</sup> Christianity is a person.

And yet so often we focus our attention not on Jesus but on ourselves. 'We have reduced the gospel message so that it is inseparable from the institution of church', Neil Cole laments. If Jesus walked into a church on Sunday morning, what would change? Does he take part, or is he the star player left sitting with the subs on the bench? Is it Jesus we talk about, or is it church? Who is this Jesus? 'Who do you say that I am?', he asked the disciples. A church is shaped in large part by its answer to that question. It was to a church that Jesus said, 'I stand at the door and knock'. How ready are we to let him in?<sup>30</sup>

I think these are timely questions. Philosophers talk to us of the postmodern rejection of metanarrative – of the idea that there is an overarching meaning to life. Postmodernism gives us a tremendous opportunity to re-examine who we are and what we are doing – but whilst we may agree with its rejection of the modern metanarrative, we don't have to invent our own, for we have one. Social philosopher Ivan Illich once said that if you want to change society, you must tell an alternative story. We've got an alternative story. It's a story about Jesus.

### *Unity*

Secondly, we need unity, a unity which comes from our identity as a community sustained by the Spirit in a world breathed by the Spirit. Unity, for us as for Father, Son and Spirit, will be expressed in a common vision and a shared purpose. If there is shared vision and purpose, then we can dispense with the centralisation and control which is the natural human response when things are not going well. If we are united in our thinking and our praying, then there is room for experimentation, for diversification, for the empowerment of local leadership without which growth is impossible. These are commonplaces amongst experts on change and growth in secular organisations, but they apply no less to the Church. It's long been recognised that the Church must change if she is to stay the same. If we are united in our vision and purpose, we will be able to adopt a permission giving approach which fosters the creativity we will need if we are to make that possible. I am always struck by the first scriptural reference to an individual being filled by the Spirit – it was the artisan Bezalel, charged with the crafting of the tabernacle in the book of Exodus.<sup>31</sup>

What might our purpose be? Well, one possibility is that suggested in the recent *Resourcing Mission* report of the Church of England – 'we suggest that [our] mission objective should be stated as to present to all people of England the good news of Jesus Christ as the hope of the world'. That is, after all, the task that Jesus left us.<sup>32</sup>

If this is right, it means that we must do theology together. It means sharing ideas, exchanging stories. It means being willing to take risks, to trust one another, to be humble. And it means being open to the new things the Spirit of God might do among us - for we have, as Jane Williams remarks, lost a great deal through fear of finding the Holy Spirit at work without our authorisation.<sup>33</sup>

### *Diversity – or, letting a thousand flowers bloom*

Thirdly, we need diversity. Robert Warren has said that in a period of transition we should let a thousand flowers bloom. One way of looking at the relationship between the Spirit and the Church is to say that we

should cultivate diversity, not just because we live in an increasingly diverse culture, but because diversity is a fundamental characteristic of spiritual reality, an essential part of the self-expression of the Spirit of God in her life-giving act of creation. There are, I'm told, between quarter and half a million species of flowering plants on earth.<sup>34</sup>

We live now in a world where a diversity that was once global has become local. I look out of my window, and beside the native lime and birch trees in my garden I see the Australian eucalyptus and Norwegian spruce next door. I live in a city where instead of just English, 200 languages are now spoken. How can we presume that the Spirit who created and presides over such variety would have us express ourselves in any other way, once it presses all around us? How would he have us worship, where would he have us meet, how would he encourage us to reach out to others? Having gifted us spiritually, how would he have us use those gifts except as parts of a diverse, creative and developing community of believers?

I don't of course know the answer to those questions. But we have within us, as a charismatic community, the capacity to explore them. We can dream dreams, as the prophet Joel foretold that we would when the Spirit was poured out in days to come. Nothing can take place that has not first been imagined; so perhaps we should start by unleashing our imaginations. We live in an age where creativity is at a premium, and all too often we stifle it. We need to identify and release our prophets, recruit our Bezalels, set free our poets. It doesn't all have to be new stuff; we can look to our own traditions, bring out of our treasure not just what is new but also what is old. We live in a pickn mix age, and we have an astonishingly diverse spiritual heritage to draw on. Let's borrow from one another and borrow from the past. We have much to learn and much to share.<sup>35</sup>

### *Depending on the Holy Spirit*

Finally, to end where we began, we must depend on the Spirit, the Spirit who gave and sustains our common life. Diversity in itself is just postmodernism. We do need diversity of both form and approach, but it's the content which is the key, and the content is relationship with Jesus through daily dependence on the Holy Spirit. I came across a comment recently from a Korean pastor who'd been visiting some megachurches in the US. What did he think, they asked him at the end of this stay? He paused. 'Well, it's just amazing what you people can do without the Holy Spirit'. We mustn't let that be said of us.<sup>36</sup>

So if we are going to count for anything in this postmodern world, the Spirit must remain the key to everything that we are and do. José Comblin predicts that the new era of Church will be under the sign of the Holy Spirit, and that charismatic experience will be valued more highly than at any time since the third century. If so, such experience will be understood not narrowly as the exercising of the gifts of the Spirit by individuals – although it will always be that too – but broadly as a renewed willingness to abandon our certainties and allow the wind to blow where it will. It's been said that what we need more than anything else is an adventure.<sup>37</sup> In particular, we need to allow our life and mission to be shaped a God of life-breathing diversity who grows great big trees from tiny seeds, so that the birds of the air can come and make their nests in the branches.

And there are a lot of birds out there.

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<sup>1</sup> Alister McGrath, *The Future of Christianity*, Blackwell, 2002, ch. 6. See also the protest of John Drane that academic theology has conformed to a secular model and failed to refer to the concrete situation of the church, thus contributing to its decline - *The McDonaldization of the Church*, DLT, 2000, ch. 1. For theology as a conversation see Mark Cartledge, *Encountering the Spirit – the Charismatic tradition*, DLT, 2006 p. 121. Nouwen quotes Carl Rogers: 'I have found that the very feeling which has seemed to me most private, most personal and hence most incomprehensible by others, has turned out to be an expression for which there is a resonance in many other people. It has led me to believe that what is most personal and unique in each one of us is probably the very element which would, if it were shared or expressed, speak most deeply to others', *The Wounded Healer*, DLT, 1994, p. 74.

<sup>2</sup> Eg Richard Mabey, *BBC Wildlife*, March 2007: 'the intricacy of the living world means, I suspect, that Intelligent Design is mathematically impossible as well as biologically improbable' – and yet in the same article describes listening to 'a sacred oratorio of sound', experiencing 'a moment of communion', being 'part of a larger being'...

<sup>3</sup> NRSV. Other translations use the verb 'hover' rather than 'swept', and 'Spirit of God' or 'divine wind' rather than 'wind'. See R. Cantalamessa, *Come, Creator Spirit – meditations on the Veni Creator*, Liturgical Press, 2003, p. 8.

<sup>4</sup> Augustine, *Exposition on the Psalms* 45.7 (quoted Cantalamessa, *Come, Creator Spirit*, p. 95). Footprints - Meister Eckhart (quoted Matthew Fox, *Western Spirituality*, Bear & Co, 1981 p. 220. Thoughts - Maximus the Confessor (quoted Ray Simpson, *Church of the Isles*, Kevin Mayhew, 2003 p. 204). Music - Honorius of Autun (quoted Matthew Fox, *Original Blessing – a Primer in Creation Spirituality*, Bear & Co, 1983, p. 70). Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* (quoted in Ian Bradley, *God is Green*, DLT, 1990, p. 32); Bonaventure, *Journey of the Mind into God*, ch. 2, internet edition [www.catholic-forum.com/saints/stb16012.htm](http://www.catholic-forum.com/saints/stb16012.htm); John Calvin, *Institutes I.v.1* (quoted Alister McGrath, *Bridge-Building – Effective Christian Apologetics*, IVP, 1992 p. 33); Jonathan Edwards, *Images or Shadows of Divine Things*, Yale University Press, 1948, pp. 44, 61. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *Hymn of the Universe*, Collins, 1965, pp. 35-36. For more quotations and examples see Alison Morgan, *Praying with Creation*, ReSource booklet no.4, ReSource, 2006.

<sup>5</sup> Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Towards a Theology of Nature*, Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993 p. 34.

<sup>6</sup> See Ps 104.27-30, 90.5-6; Is 40.31, Lam 5.2; Ez 36.26; Isaiah 65.17. For a discussion of the Spirit's role in creating and renewing the world see Christopher J. H. Wright, *Knowing the Holy Spirit through the Old Testament*, Monarch, 2006, ch.1; and Alison Morgan, *Renewal in Scripture*, ReSource booklet no. 3, ReSource 2006.

<sup>7</sup> Irenaeus is quoted in Jean-Jacques Suurmond, *Word and Spirit at Play - towards a charismatic theology*, SCM Press, 1994, Part II ch. 1, p. 41. Suurmond discusses the relationship between Spirit, Word and the Wisdom tradition in Part II chs 1-2.

<sup>8</sup> Romans 1.20. Commentators often point to 1 Corinthians 15.35-49 as an example.

<sup>9</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *Images or Shadows of Divine Things*, Yale University Press, 1948, pp. 65, 109; Charles Harold Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom*, Nisbet, 1935, pp. 21-22.

<sup>10</sup> Gordon Fee, *Paul, the Spirit and the People of God*, Hendrikson Publishers, 1996, ch. 5.

<sup>11</sup> For the tearing of the heavens in Mark 1.10 and 15.38 see Tom Wright, *Mark for Everyone*, SPCK, 2001, p. 5 & p. 216. Tom spoke about the work of the Spirit in a lecture 'Inciting Insight – the Holy Spirit in the church', Fulcrum conference, Islington 29.4.05. See also his *Simply Christian*, SPCK, 2006, p. 103.

<sup>12</sup> William Abraham, *The Logic of Renewal*, Eerdmans, 2003, p. 158: 'the church is from beginning to end a charismatic community, a community brought into existence, equipped, guided, and sustained by the Holy Spirit'. Often we see the church more as an institution, a building, a gathering of people with shared values, a hierarchy of officers. For a helpful discussion of the nature of the church from different perspectives see José Comblin, *The Holy Spirit and Liberation*, ch. 3; Neil Cole, *Organic Church – growing faith where life happens*, Jossey-Bass, 2005, ch. 3; Brian Hathaway, *Beyond renewal – the kingdom of God*, Word (UK), 1990, ch. 5. For Paul see 1 Cor 12.13; 2 Cor 3.3.

<sup>13</sup> Unity and diversity is also a key theme of Jesus' prayer to his Father on behalf of his disciples and their successors in John 17. For the early church see Acts chapters 2, 4, 5. For Paul see Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 12, Ephesians 4 (the quote is from 1 Corinthians 12). See also Roland Allen, *Missionary Methods: St Paul's or ours?*, Eerdmans, 1962 (first published 1912); Vincent Donovan, *Christianity Rediscovered: an epistle from the Masai*, SCM Press, 1982. An excellent discussion of what this might mean in the contemporary church is to be found in Michael Frost & Alan Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come – innovation and mission for the 21<sup>st</sup>-century church*, Hendrikson Publishers, 2003.

<sup>14</sup> For renewal in the New Testament see Romans 7.6, 1 Peter 1.3, 2 Cor 5.17, Ephesians 4.24, Mark 16.17, 1 Cor 12.7ff, Acts 17.19, Colossians 3.11, John 13.34, Luke 4.18. For Paul see Romans 7.6, 1 Peter 1.3, 2 Cor 5.17, Ephesians 4.24, Mark 16.17, 1 Cor 12.7ff, Acts 17.19, Colossians 3.11, John 13.34, Luke 4.18; and Alison Morgan, *Renewal, what is it and what is it for*, Grove Books, 2006. For Paul's approach to the Church see Roland Allen, *Missionary Methods*, section IV, 'St Paul's method of dealing with organised churches'. The locus classicus would be Romans 7-8. The nearest Paul comes to offering an organisational structure for the Church is Ephesians 4, in which he talks about different leadership giftings. For the letters to the churches see Revelation chs 2-3.

<sup>15</sup> Aquinas had said that everything which could be received from the Holy Spirit had already been given and was now to be found in the church – see J. Comblin, *The Holy Spirit and Liberation*, ch. 1. A good charismatic history of the church is

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given by Mark Cartledge, *Encountering the Spirit – the charismatic tradition*, DLT, 2006; see also David Allen, *The Unfailing Stream – a charismatic church history in outline*, Sovereign World, 1994. For Montanism see T. D. Barnes, *Tertullian, a historical and literary study*, Clarendon Press, 1971, ch. 5, and Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church*, Pelican, 1967, ch. 2.

<sup>16</sup> Suurmond, *Word and Spirit at Play*, III 1 'Church history' esp. pp. 63-69; Comblin, *The Holy Spirit and Liberation*, esp pp. 184-6 and ch. 3, 'The Holy Spirit in the Church'.

<sup>17</sup> For the accommodation of the Church to modernity see the excellent collection of essays in *Faith and Modernity*, ed. P. Sampson et al, Regnum Books, 1994. Berkhof is quoted by D. J. Hall: *The End of Christendom and the Future of Christianity*, Trinity Press International, 1995, p. 18.

<sup>18</sup> William Abraham, *The Logic of Renewal*, Eerdmans, 2003, p. 21.

<sup>19</sup> For the relationship between Church and culture in history see Alison Morgan, *The Wild Gospel*, Monarch, 2005, ch. 4. For Michael Riddell see his *Threshold of the Future – reforming the church in the post-Christian West*, SPCK, 1998, p. 93. For comparison between the current situation and the Reformation see José Comblin, *The Holy Spirit and Liberation*, p. 60.

<sup>20</sup> For modernism and the Church see Eddie Gibbs and Ian Coffey, *Church Next – quantum changes in Christian ministry*, IVP, 2001, p. 30; and George Ritzer, *The McDonaldization of Society*, Pine Forge Press, 1993, discussed by John Drane, *The McDonaldization of the Church – spirituality, creativity and the future of the Church*, DLT, 2000, ch. 3.

<sup>21</sup> See the critique of modern church buildings by Jonny Baker in Eddie Gibbs and Ryan Bolger, *Emerging Churches – Creating Christian community in postmodern cultures*, SPCK, 2006, p. 175. For models of church see Steven Croft, *Transforming Communities – re-imagining church for the 21<sup>st</sup> century*, DLT 2002, ch. 4. Many of the initiatives mentioned here have brought great growth to the church. But what works in some places does not work in others. It is not the initiatives themselves, but their adoption as blueprints which is unhelpful; one size no longer fits all.

<sup>22</sup> Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come – Innovation for the 21<sup>st</sup>-century Church*, Hendrikson Publishers, 2003, p. 35. The book offers an eloquent advocacy for a church which is not 'attractational' but 'missional' in its approach – ie one which engages with people by going to them rather than expecting them to come to it.

<sup>23</sup> See the research by Yvonne Richmond in Coventry, in Nick Spencer, *Beyond the Fringe – Researching a Spiritual Age*, LICC, Cliff College Publishing, 2005. Michael Moynagh dubs postmodernity 'an experience economy' – *Changing World, Changing Church*, Monarch, 2001, p. 8.

<sup>24</sup> Ken Blanchard & Terry Waghorn: *Mission Possible - becoming a world-class organization while there's still time*, McGraw Hill, 1997, p. xxi. Cp the comment by Steven Croft, *Transforming Communities*, p. 160: 'This generation of Christian ministers is called to transitional leadership: to maintain the present structures of church life but to develop within and alongside them new and creative ways of being church.' Less optimistic statements have been made by Michael Riddell, 'The greatest barrier to the gospel in contemporary Western culture is the church. The forms of the church, its life and pronouncements; these act to prevent people from hearing the liberating story of Jesus', in his *Threshold of the Future*, p. 57; Howard Snyder, 'the church will increasingly have to choose between a charismatic and an institutional or bureaucratic model for its life and structure', in his *Radical Renewal – the problem of wineskins today*, Touch Publications, 1996, p. 194. Many of the Church's problems have lain in its failure to fully acknowledge both Word and Spirit. Word without Spirit leads to a rationalistic faith. Spirit without Word leads to a potentially heretical faith – as with the Cathars, the Quakers and others.

<sup>25</sup> See Comblin's remark that 'experience of the Holy Spirit cannot ..be reduced to the charismatic manifestations so highly prized by the Corinthians', *The Holy Spirit and Liberation*, p. 41. Bible refs in this para: John 7.38, Jeremiah 17.7-8, Galatians 5.22, Matthew 5.13-14, 1 Peter 2.4.

<sup>26</sup> See the comment in *Mission-Shaped Church*, CHP, 2004, p. 132.

<sup>27</sup> The point is powerfully made by Raniero Cantalamessa, *Come, Creator Spirit*, ch. 2, 'The Holy Spirit changes chaos into cosmos'.

<sup>28</sup> Our English word 'church' in fact comes from the Greek *kuriakos*, meaning 'belonging to the Lord' – see Owen Chadwick, *A History of Christianity*, Phoenix, 1995, ch. 1.

<sup>29</sup> Frost & Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come*, p. 113; Michael Riddell, *Threshold of the Future*, p. 115; Nick Spencer, *Beyond the Fringe*, p. 19.

<sup>30</sup> Neil Cole, *Organic Church*, ch. 4. See also Sally Gaze, *Mission-Shaped and Rural*, CHP, 2006, pp. 172-73; and the tale of two churches told by Martin Down, *Speak to these Bones*, Monarch, 1993.

<sup>31</sup> For decentralisation see Ken Blanchard, *Mission Impossible*; Stephen Covey, *The Eighth Habit – from Effectiveness to Greatness*, Simon & Schuster, 2004. Cole cites Hock, founder of Visa, saying an organisation can dispense with command/control if it holds common purpose and principles – people will behave creatively in accordance with them (Neil Cole, *Organic Church – growing faith where life happens*, Jossey-Bass 2005, p. 124). See the comment by Gibbs and Coffey, 'If denominational structures are in place primarily as instruments of control, then the identity problem is probably insurmountable. But if these vertical structures can be dismantled to provide financial and personnel resources by which local churches can be effectively serviced, their diversity celebrated and a variety of models assessed, then structures can

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play an important role', *Church Next*, p. 71. The practical implications of such an approach are explored by Bob Jackson, *The Road to Growth*, CHP, 2005. For Bezalel see Exodus 35.30-35.

<sup>32</sup> *Resourcing Mission for a 21<sup>st</sup> century Church*, CHP, 2006, p. 21. See Matt 28.19-20 and John 20.21-22.

<sup>33</sup> Fulcrum conference, Islington, 29.4.05.

<sup>34</sup> *Building Missionary Congregations*, CHP, 1996 (a concept perversely taken from the *Little Red Book* of Mao Tse-Tung: 'Letting a hundred flowers blossom and a hundred schools of thought contend is the policy for promoting the progress of the arts and the sciences and a flourishing socialist culture in our land', *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung*, Foreign Languages Press, Peking, 1968 pp. 302-03). Bob Jackson has remarked that perhaps our greatest mistake under modernism was to treat all churches as if they were oak trees, able to grow to any size and live forever - *Hope for the Church*, CHP, 2004, p. 132. For the number of plant species see [www.plant-talk.org/stories/28bramw.html](http://www.plant-talk.org/stories/28bramw.html).

<sup>35</sup> For Joel's prophecy see Joel 2.28-29, and Acts 2.16-18. For treasures new and old see Matthew 13.52.

<sup>36</sup> Quoted by Neil Cole, *Organic Church*, p. 50.

<sup>37</sup> José Comblin, *The Holy Spirit and Liberation*, p. 41: 'We are witnessing a resurgence of experience of the Holy Spirit. If this is the case, it is a phenomenon unique in the history of the church since the third century. It is a complete inversion of the course the church in the West has followed since then.' See also p. 19. The call for adventure is given by Sue Hope, *Mission-Shaped Spirituality*, CHP, 2006, p. 108.

### For further reading

Abraham, William: *The Logic of Renewal*, Eerdmans, 2003

Blanchard, Ken & Terry Waghorn: *Mission Possible – becoming a world-class organization while there's still time*, McGraw Hill, 1997.

Cantalamessa, Raniero: *Come, Creator Spirit – Meditations on the Veni Creator*, Liturgical Press, 2003.

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Revd Dr Alison Morgan, Wells, Somerset

[www.alisonmorgan.co.uk](http://www.alisonmorgan.co.uk).