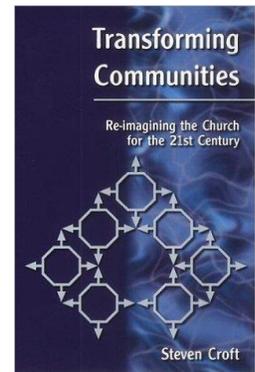


# Steven Croft : Transforming Communities

## - re-imagining the Church for the 21<sup>st</sup> century

DLT 2002

Notes by Alison Morgan Nov 2004



Written to introduce the idea of small groups ('transforming communities') in traditional parish churches which have no experience of them. Clear, informative, thorough - but not inspiring. He insists that any discussion of forms of church must be based on a theological understanding of what the church is meant to be; and offers some quite neat critiques of different approaches. Book ends with a step-by-step guide to how to establish a small group.

### PART ONE : A STORY

'Story' of a church which was declining, then formed a little midweek group and began to grow. A thumbnail sketch of the average parish church, still doing things the way it always did, getting older and more distant from the community.

### PART TWO : SEEING CLEARLY – The Church in the present and the future

#### *2. Moments of change*

Changing patterns in church and society –

Old ways of being church:

- Christian faith is normal
- People meet in a church near where they live
- People therefore already know one another
- Most have grown up in the church
- Most ministry is done by the clergy
- Each church has its own building and minister
- Its life is stable and predictable.

Challenges from a changing world:

- Faith is no longer normal
- Multicultural, multifaith society
- Postmodernism
- Mobility
- Community not based on geography; church members don't know each other
- Sunday no longer day of rest
- Increased demands on leisure and work time
- People becoming Christians as adults
- Lay ministry
- Change everywhere, inc in church

Patterns of decline, p 24 (48% in 'catholic' churches, 3% in 'evangelical' ones, 1989-98.)

Clergy and congregations – merging benefices usually declines them.

#### *3. Renewing vision*

How?

1. listen to the context
2. nurture your picture of what is possible
3. discern your vocation
4. ask, 'what kind of vision are we seeking?'
5. test, weigh, refine the vision

## 6. communicate clearly

An essential part of developing vision is nourishing our often impoverished ideas of what it means to be the Christian community. A vision built on an emaciated theology of what it means to be church will not satisfy and provides an inadequate foundation for the building of a healthy church. p37

The word 'vision' has been taken over by the secular world; once it was the preserve of prophets – now it is to do with the generation of profits, p38.

Prophets spoke their vision inspiringly, using experience, image, dialogue, drama, incarnation, passion, emotion. 'The thought of Ezekiel using an overhead projector and a list to get across his message is a strange one', p43.

## 4. Models for the future

5 models of church which come from the world:

1. **The church as a chain of cinemas** – attended by people who happen to have chosen a particular service for a variety of personal reasons. Role of clergy is to staff the services, and the important thing is to keep them going; so joining parishes means the clergy just do more services. Much redistribution of clergy is based on this assumption: and it sorely lacks a theology of church. Assumptions:
  - We need to keep the church going in its existing pattern of services
  - Therefore we need to reorder our resources to make this possibleBut the question should be, what is the church called to be/become/be doing in our society at the present time? Churches are communities, not random collections of individuals. We need to develop a richer theological understanding of what the church is called to be as the basis of a strategy for ministry.
2. **The church as a local franchise** – open a new coffee shop but link to Starbucks, and use their design, image, product, market research, staff training, advertising. The franchise approach to church life is one in which a local congregation gears their worship style, means of evangelism and nurture, philosophy of ministry, govt and purpose towards a particular model which is thought effective. Some churches now describe their life according to the 'brand' of nurture course they use, or which network they belong to or conference they attend. Drane argues that this franchise mentality (characterised by efficiency, calculability, predictability, control) will seriously damage the creativity, freedom, variety, adaptability of the church. The local church needs to emphasize the particular as much as the general. Cp letters to the churches in Revelation – they have different strengths and different weaknesses.
3. **The church as a unit of production** – when its chief aim/vision is defined as a quantifiable output, and the life of the congregation is geared simply towards generating that output in an efficient and sustainable way. Eg: 'this church exists to make disciples who make disciples'. Like saying that marriage exists to procreate and raise children. If the chief/only purpose of the life of a community is to make disciples it won't be a healthy place in which to nurture new Christians. Usually found in churches where fulfilling of Great Commission has been the paramount motivation shaping the life of the church. Danger if cells are used in this way – must be based on solid theol. understanding of why they exist, and must not be used simply as means of making a church grow.
4. **The church and quality control** - see Schwartz and Warren on Healthy Churches. Good idea; but not if taken as list of qualities which make churches attractive to their members.
5. **The church as a mirror of society** – argument that since society is changing, church must change with it if it wants to thrive. Moynagh, Gibbs, Greenwood. Good to listen to the contemporary culture, but only if we ask the more fundamental theological questions about the nature/vocation of the church in every generation.

## 5. A Way forward?

Life of the church in GB today is ready for change.

One extreme is the franchise approach: to define the route to becoming a fruitful church, so that the way to do church is thought through in advance, defined, described, packaged and put into practice in the local situation. This is the opposite of true subsidiarity and tends to stifle the creative work of the Spirit, of individuals, of communities. It also takes away the concept of differences between contexts and particular vocations on groups of Christians.

The other extreme is to say that there may be no recognisably uniform way forward. Robert Warren, *Building missionary congregations* – ‘in a period of transition, we would be wise to let ‘a thousand flowers bloom’’. But this provides too little guidance.

Croft wants to argue a middle way – a framework for growth in the local situation. The CofE has provided a trellis of single parish church and stipendiary minister, which no longer works. We need a new framework, which must

- Be appropriate theologically
- Be sustainable given the resources we have
- Be able to give stability to vulnerable communities
- Resource the mission of the whole church to our wider society

It must be transferable to different social/geographical contexts and different sizes of church.

He proposes the model that the basic building block of the local church, alongside the congregation, should be the small group of Christian people who together form a transforming community. Its purpose should be to worship God, build relationships, learn together, support one another’s ministry in the community. It catches Jesus’s travels with the disciples, the early Christian house churches, the monastic communities, Methodist class meetings, house group movt, cell church and base ecclesial communities.

*The renewal of the church will come not through the re-organisation of ministry to serve existing structures but through the renewal of the whole Church in relationship and community, 72.*

Three possible styles of transforming community:

1. intentional communities – set up deliberately
2. existing communities, formal/informal
3. associational networks – eg lunch clubs, working together on a projec

Transforming communities work in any size of church.

## 6. Foundations, roots, resources

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, 85. Transformational communities are not a new development but the restoration of an aspect of the Christian faith which has always been present in the tradition.

3 theological foundations:

1. The ministry of all the baptised
2. The horizon of ministry is the kingdom of God (not the congregation)
3. The rhythm of worship and mission (balance between loving God and loving neighbour)

Roots and resources:

- Jesus and disciples
- Catechuminate in NT church
- Monastic movt
- Reformation – Luther: ‘those who want to be Christians in earnest.. should meet along in a house somewhere to pray, to read, to baptize and read the sacrament, and do other Christian works’, 97.
- House group movt
- Base ecclesial communities
- Cell church movt
- Contemporary and transitional communities

## PART THREE : NURTURING THE VISION – The Church in Scripture and Tradition

### 7. The Called Community – the Church in relationship with God

### 8. Members of one Body – the Church in relation to herself

Body image is probably borrowed from contemp historical literature, and is a metaphor for unity in diversity within the secular state. Word ‘member’ derives from the Latin word *membrum* which means a limb/part of the body. Hence, member of the golf club.

Kind of Christian community in NT is one in which relationships are deep and real enough to demand the regular forgiveness which is essential in close families. Do we allow them to grow to that point?

### 9. *A Light to the nations – The Church in relation to God's world*

The light of the world

The mission of the first disciples – Lk 4

2 ways: to gather a community, to proclaim the kingdom → mission and transforming communities

Exercising gifts and discovering vocation together

### 10. *Pilgrims in progress – the Church in relation to time*

We are *pilgrims, aliens, strangers*. Epistle to Diognetes (p153) →

Christians were followers of The Way, travelling with Jesus a journey of faith, in company with others, the way of the cross.

This pilgrim image echoes through the Christian tradition, most powerfully in Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress.

**Now and not yet.** Means imperfections, struggles, frustration, conflict; and a heavenly banquet.

Pilgrimage is made possible within transforming communities, which offer light, flexible structures of worship, formation, fellowship and mission in a variety of ways within local congregations.

*Christians are distinguished from other men neither by country, nor language, nor the customs which they observe. For they neither inhabit cities of their own, nor employ a particular form of speech, nor lead a life which is marked out by any singularity... They dwell in their own countries but simply as sojourners. As citizens, they share in all things with others, and yet endure all things as if foreigners. Every foreign land is to them as their native country and every land of their birth as a land of strangers..*  
*To sum up all in one word – what the soul is in the body, that are Christians in the world. The soul is dispersed through all the members of the body and Christians are scattered through all the cities of the world. The soul dwells in the body, yet is not of the body, and the Christians dwell in the world yet are not of the world.*

*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.*

## PART FOUR : ENABLING TRANSFORMING COMMUNITIES

### 11. *Planning and policies*

How to get started. 'These chapters are written in the belief that establishing transforming communities may be an important step forwards for many churches in the UK at the present time'.

Getting ownership from a core team, who must themselves be willing to become a transforming community, sharing their lives, praying for and supporting one another on the journey.

Making connections – not just with other members of the church but with the community also. We need both 'bonding' and 'bridging' links. Churches/denominations where internal bonding is not matched by bridging to the wider community have little impact.

Overcoming objections.

Developing and sustaining leaders.

### 12. *Forming a transforming community*

Helpful patterns of an evening together, according to whether the group is beginning, developing or mature.

**Conclusion.**