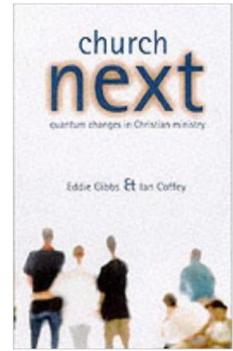


Eddie Gibbs and Ian Coffey

Church Next – Quantum Changes in Christian Ministry

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Notes Alison Morgan January 2002



Excellent overview of the issues facing the church in the west, and of the ways in which it has been trying to tackle them in different places. Offers no blueprint, but loads of food for thought – perhaps the best general introduction to the literature on where we might be going. 230pp.

Introduction

Church is always one generation from extinction. Worrying decline. But it has always been the case that new wine must be poured into new wineskins; and they cannot just be freshly made versions of the old models. Nor can they be cut from templates provided by small no of high profile churches that have succeeded in bucking the trend. 3 outlooks in our churches, often intermingled: traditional, modern, postmodern. Diags p 217. Traditional church lives within the circle of the culture and expects people to come to it. Modern church occupies a separate circle from the culture and tries to interact with it. Postmodern church is in centre of a number of outlying patches, which it interacts with. Each has been shaped by culture. US 43% still say they've been to church in the last 7 days; constant over the last 50 yrs. Contrast decline in UK. Americans like institutions; and they are 80 years behind in industrialisation and urbanisation, meaning they have stronger and more recent roots in a community.

1. From living in the past to engaging with the present

The longer a person lives, the more they dwell on the past rather than engage with the present; this is also true of institutions. Church attendance in UK in 1851 was 39%. After WW1 it began to go down, except for decade of 40s. Falling ever since. Same rate in Australia, NZ, Canada.

Mike Regele, *The death of the church* – data mapping org. Thinks 00s of churches will close; failing to discern the signs of the times and rise to the challenges. Other analysts predict loss of 60% of all existing congregations in US by 2050. Peter Brierley and English statistics – 11.7% decline in 70s, 13% in 80s, 22% in 90s. In numerical terms that means from 5.4 m to 3.7m weekly attendees in 30 years.

Decline not due to secularisation: because other religions/spiritualities have grown.

Growing churches are usually in suburban areas, market sensitive, high standard, empowering laity.

Churches can become so traumatised by their internal problems that they fail to notice that society at large is in the midst of a cultural shift of seismic proportions; they need to WAKE UP.

Churches in traditional societies (eg rural England) still have a role as institution in the community; they need to bear witness to gospel within the social structures without being subverted by them (eg by government agenda that goes with government grants for social projects). Average age of people attending is 20 years older than gen population.

Church and modernity

Summary of modernity – an understanding of the world through autonomous human rationality. Evangelicalism arose within this context.

Modernity is – centralised hierarchies, predictable world and long-term planning, confidence in human ability to manage present and future, change initiated at centre

Church and postmodernity

Atmosphere of cynicism; abandonment of the illusive search for truth in favour of what works for you, creation of own meaning.

Postmodernity is – decentralised networks, unpredictable world requiring rapid response of 'plan-do', uncertainty re present and paranoia re future, change initiated at periphery.

As we move from modernity to postmodernity, the church is marginalised. Secular world allows no place for prophet or priest. Evangelicals need greater awareness of the role of poet in raising the questions and in providing platform for the prophet to

gain a hearing; our age has more regard for the artist than for the orator. Evangelical churches will need to move from invitational strategy to one of dispersal and infiltration.

D Tomlinson: *The post-evangelical*. Alternative approaches, eg Steve Cockram and The Ascension Core Team.

Modern Western society reps one of the great non-Christian cultures of the world. Evangelical tradition has been as much shaped by it as has the liberal tradition. And we remain mostly unaware.

Postmodernism offers a valuable critique of modernism. George Steiner: 'it is this break of the covenant between word and world [deconstruction] which constitutes one of the very few genuine revolutions of spirit in western history and which defines modernity itself.' Result is postmodern fragmentation. Response of Christian witness to postmodern person must be that of the fellow traveller. Gospel presentations and seeker services won't work. Gospel message must be freed from traditionalism and legalism; Christians and postmoderns stand together in recognition that we cannot determine the future – but Christians stand secure, postmoderns insecure.

How to get to grips with it – those who manage best are those not locked into the power structures. Those within hierarchies too busy. Need understanding of the changes; teambuilding ability; faith; freedom to fail.

2. From market driven to mission-oriented

Lack of missiological training in pastors means they resort to marketing and management strategies. Begin by identifying unfulfilled needs of target population, then devise strategies to meet them. Incarnational in a way – gets to where people are at.

People should not be required to cross racial, linguistic or class barriers in order to become Christians. We need to immerse selves in their culture, not extract them from it.

Responses of churches:

- judgmental isolation (world under judgment, needs to be called to repentance; but we aren't as separate from the world as we might like to think)
- protective separation (high wall round fellowship, with individuals required to clean up act and be culturally initiated)
- missionary engagement

Seeker-sensitive (reach dechurched or unchurched) vs market-driven (reach people from smaller local churches around them, with bad long term consequences)

Market driven approach has some merits; but Jesus came to do will of Father, and central to gospel is news that God has provided something humanity didn't know it needed – Jn 4.1-42, Mt 9.1-8. Rich young ruler had no idea his riches were an obstacle to him. Gospel more concerned with holiness than happiness, with spiritual growth than fulfilment. Fulfilment theology has an inadequate understanding of the biblical truth about the fallenness of the world and the role of suffering in the Christian's life. And perhaps only the most affluent, socially stable people can even think about their inner well-being. Church does not exist separate from culture; its choice is not between assimilation and isolation, but rather for contextualisation.

Characteristics of growing churches (Ian Coffey, publication forthcoming) p 57.

Missional church is attentive to culture; knows to expect a life of ambiguities; knows mission is two way. Inseparability of discipleship and mission. Being a Christian is doing as Christ did – which was mission. Not about personal benefit only.

3. From bureaucratic hierarchies to apostolic networks

'Current situation: targets move after you have fired the arrow, new targets pop up in unexpected places, and we are trying to take aim from a lurching platform!' Cultural chaos. 'Mainline denominations are facing an avalanche of problems that place question marks over their future... 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 play an important role'. 71 New church movements often lack experience of wider church, and can come to believe that they are the exclusive recipients of God's blessings.

There is widespread distrust of social institutions, and compensatory belief in oneself – the me generation. Denominational loyalty is in decline; and church members resent their dwindling resources being siphoned off to shore up bureaucracies they no longer trust. Bureaucracies can no longer depend on the loyalty of congregations to maintain them.

Old model of ministry is therapeutic – minister looks after people. More fragmented society means their needs are greater. Minister must establish relational networks so the pastoral needs are met by small groups.

Control issues – task of leader is to serve in a mentoring relationship, not control relationship. Leaders within hierarchy see their role as delegating and granting permission; those with networks empower and grant resources without trying to control. Controllers inhibit initiative and prevent failure – and thus learning of valuable lessons. Easum: ‘control is deciding what people can and can’t do. Accountability is rendering an account of what a person has or has not already done. Control is more of a power issue. Accountability is more of an integrity issue.’ 74.

Lyle Schaller identifies 21 signs of growth, *The New Reformation – tomorrow arrived yesterday* (Nashville 1996), inc creative worship, new resources, market driven planning, emphasis on prayer/spiritual formation, staff teams, flat structures, lay led study groups.

‘New apostolic’ churches replace bureaucratic authority to personal authority [LCF & Bryn Jones]. Can degenerate into manipulative authoritarianism.

Problem of church planting for parish denominations – ‘mission courtesy can lead to churches that have no heart for evangelism preventing other churches from undertaking the task that they are neglecting’, 81.

This is an age of networks. Hierarchical structures plan change slow and clumsily. In a culture of discontinuous change, *rapid response planning is the only one that will work. New apostolic churches work this way. Getting on with it.

Tom Beaudoin, *Virtual faith*, California 1998 – cyberspace upsets hierarchies; anyone can have a web page, anyone can email anyone; it is a new experimental space which is unregulated and beyond control of religious institutions. Church is slow to get hold of this.

In networking organisations, *authority is relational not structural. ‘The people who work best in networks are those who like to colour outside the lines, in contrast to hierarchical people, who paint by numbers’ 86!.

*Permission-giving leadership – leaders trust team members, acknowledge their expertise, mentor them. Works only if there is a unifying vision which flows from the basic values of the congregation.

*Empowerment – issue is not how to get the laity involved in the ministry of the church, but how to get the church involved in the ministry of the laity.

*Diversification.

*Decentralisation.

*Accountability

4. From schooling professionals to mentoring leaders

About theological education. Theological colleges/seminaries supposed to work alongside churches by providing them with resources for their ministries. But they aren’t attracting top students; call for new system of recruitment of pastors. Traditional churches and colleges are often demotivating to individuals with exceptional leadership skills. How do you measure value of theol. education? How well it trains leaders for ministry? Seminary has become an institution of modernity, training professionals like others; but this belongs to a period when the pastor did function at the cultural centre. Professors recruited for academic ability, which may be unrelated to church context. Courses tend to be remote from real life, and students get removed from their real situation for years while we train them ‘before they re-enter Planet Church as alien beings.’

Theological education needs to be revamped in consultation with church leaders and mature laity. ‘Traditional seminary education is designed to train research theologians who are to become parish practitioners. Probably they are adequately equipped for neither’ 100; we will need fewer schools of theology and more schools of ministry. Q isn’t whether theology is important, but what *kind* of theology is important. Scholarship necessary, but researchers can’t engage constantly with ministry-driven agendas. And their scholarship needs to be made more widely available. ‘Alongside scholars pursuing the traditional theological, biblical, philosophical and historical disciplines will be scholars who have a ministry focus, much as you would have pure and applied sciences in a secular university.’ 102. Wrong people get taught, and lots of the right ones don’t; ideal of residential community of students and teachers is becoming a myth rather than a reality. Importance of learning on need to know basis; adults not motivated by studying issues unconnected to the church and its mission.

Challenge to ministers

Mustn’t see selves as answers to everyone’s problems; or that our leadership / management skills will be sufficient to grow the church. Must face up to cultural uncertainty; and realise that preparation for ministry in such a culture can’t be accomplished in a highly structured environment with predictable routines.

Need firm sense of your standing before God (witness Jesus’ temptation); need to have your gifts identified and developed; need to learn to be a team builder (absent from training); to wear different hats. Training should be about developing competencies, not about absorbing content. Need to be not one man band; or even conductor, but leader of jazz band – need to combine the unpredictability of the future with the gifts of individuals. Conflict resolution.

Barna: 'a Christian leader is someone who is called by God to lead and possess virtuous character and effectively motivates, mobilizes resources, and directs people toward the fulfilment of a jointly embraced vision from God'. Leaders also need to be mentored by leaders. Training needs to be customised to take into account previous experience, gifts and calling. New paradigm churches produce different type of leaders from mainline churches – younger, creative, initiative takers.

5. From following celebrities to encountering saints

Evangelical churches often built round the celebrity status of the leader – even if they themselves aren't aiming for this. Result is often scandals and breakdowns. One cannot find one's sense of wellbeing and security in one's professional position as a church leader, only as forgiven sinners and adopted children.

Search for authentic spirituality – if the Jesus the Gen Xers ridicule is not the authentic Jesus as presented in the biblical witness, but rather a pastiche, a commercialised and sentimentalised Jesus, they are making an imp point. Their search is much wider than ever before; announcement of divinely revealed truth simply won't suffice any more. Not that truth isn't important; more a matter of the perspective one takes on God's touch (experience) and God's truth.

Word is replaced by image for a TV generation; they respond to a multisensory message, and one that transcends boundaries – they quite happy to mix Gregorian chant with strobe lights. The approach to God that they encounter in church must be as holistic as their search has been. Importance of worship – defined by Donald Miller as a form of sacred lovemaking, transcending the routinised rituals that so often structure the divine-human communication. Worship is not an escapist activity but an empowering one; the whole of life is transfused with a sense of God's presence.

The spiritual search of Gen X is not for answers to intellectual questions, but for a transforming relationship with God. They don't mind question marks. They do mind superficiality or hypocrisy. There was no shortage of religious professionals in Jesus' day; but they weren't in touch with the people, and dismissed them as law-breakers.

We have become spiritually impoverished – suspicion of other traditions, neglect of our own spiritual heritage. Purpose of contemplative life (Diogenes Allen) is 'to perceive all things in relation to God and to know God's continuous presence in and through them'.¹³² We need to recover spiritual traditions: Celtic and orthodox spirituality, lectio divina, respiratory prayer, Taize. Celtic spirituality emphasizes life as a journey, and nurtures a life of prayer in which God is acknowledged in all life's mundane activities, and its saints are ordinary people. Biblical spirituality is concerned with brining our body and soul into an intimate relationship with the heart of God. Concerned with holiness, not transient experiences, and rests on a disciplined life. Genuine spiritual search must be lived in community, and means taking time to meditate on scriptures, ponder life, appreciate nature. And the hardest of all, in our hyperactive culture – to be still and focus on the presence of God.

6. From dead orthodoxy to living faith

In the US, 'unchurched' means lapsed church goer. Here it means those who never have been church attenders. Seeker sensitive churches mostly in US and mostly reach those with church upbringing. Willow Creek. Saddleback Community Church. George Lings, *Encounters on the edge*, looks at groups working with the UK unchurched. Important to distinguish between seeker sensitive (engaging with culture) and market driven (providing what they want). The unchurched are not attracted to the church as an institution because of its media image.

In many evangelical churches our tradition has been too activist to understand the true nature of worship. Must be inspired by the awesome, purifying, energising presence of God. It must reflect a range of responses to God – unworthiness, intimacy, transcendence; but never overfamiliarity. Curious that the same churchgoers happily go to services from different traditions. Evangelical orthodoxy can squeeze out mystery.

Experiments – New Frontiers, Pioneer, Vineyard, Cornerstone, Ichthus; Spring Harvest; Greenbelt. Sheffield now going strong again p 161 'the tribal gathering'.

Entertainment no substitute for participation.

7. From attracting a crowd to seeking the lost

Church is now jus one piece in a complex social kaleidoscope in which the pieces are constantly realigning, 167. We have to change from centripetal to a centrifugal dynamic.

Seeker sensitive approaches work in new suburbs, with pastors with gift of evangelism and ability to empower others. Can't just transplant it here. 30% joiners have no previous church affiliation. Most are refugees from collapse of 3 groups – legalistic fundamentalism, watered-down liberalism, over ritualistic traditionalism. US doesn't have real unchurched people like we do – 83% of US adults have been churchgoers at some time in their life.

Worship is important for the seeker – a spiritual search rather than an intellectual quest. Worship stimulates evangelism, not the other way round. It invites nonbelievers into presence of God if it has a sense of his presence, worship centred on Christ, opening up to God, participation in relationship with God and others.

Harvesting is done in fields not barns – but our main focus has been barn based activities. Need to get out there and seek the seeker.

8. From belonging to believing

In US it has been possible to assume that a person was culturally compatible with the church. Hence big speaker evangelists demanding a commitment now.

Church is now a minority movement; and people need to see what the Christian life looks like. The never-churched need to be part of a community to see impact of the gospel and experience some of its benefits. Willow Creek has 7 step model, from person developing friendship with member, hearing witness, visiting guest meeting, attending midweek worship and teaching meeting, joining small group, using gifts in serving, becoming good steward of finances.

Christians are called to live the story, not restate it. Weakness of relational approach is that it can become testimony based, and people can hold back through fear of jeopardising a friendship. But in bureaucratized culture where people are not individuals, it the only way.

Develop alternative, person-centred witnessing approaches:

- those who say God remote from their lives: share Romans 3.23-4, all have sinned.. grace as gift.. redemption in Christ Jesus
- overachievers: share 2 Cor 5.15, he died for all so that those who live might live no longer for selves
- those who feel their lives are messed beyond help; : share 2 Cor 5.17, new creation
- those crushed by guilt : share Ps 51.1-12
- those ruled by anxiety : share 1 Peter 5.6-7 cast all your anxiety..
- those afraid of death : share Romans 8.35-9 nothing will separate us from love of God.

9. From generic congregations to incarnational communities

Megachurches: are led by entrepreneurial founding pastors, located in suburbs, serve cities, profile their target population, operate at high standard, attract able leaders, have money, have space.

First Christian communities were a movement, not an institution; so must we be today. We must have missionary outlook. Critique by Clapp of Niebuhr on Christ and culture – Niebuhr didn't conceive that the church itself was a culture. Gospel, culture and church must be 3 overlapping circles. A missionary church must benefit from its heritage, be faithful to the gospel, relevant to its setting, inspired by hope of Christ's return. Each congregation may have up to 5 distinct generations in it, with distinct outlooks; minister to them all. Build authentic community. Don't let spirituality become isolated from theology. Be apostolic. Have strong vision and flexible plan. Learn to infiltrate rather than invite. Live adventurously with diversity and paradox.

www.alisonmorgan.co.uk