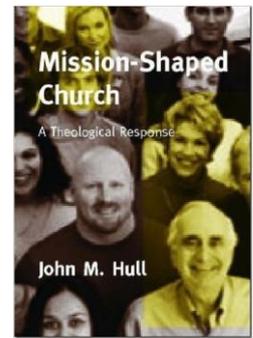


John M Hull

# Mission Shaped Church : A Theological Response

SCM Press 2006

Notes by Alison Morgan



A slim volume – 36pp – dressed in the garb of the original report, but in fact an independent response. John Hull's background is in ecumenism and religious education, and he writes from his own particular standpoint. It's one which is based on radically different foundations from those on which the authors of the original report stand, and although John's essay is presented as a theological critique of the details of the report, it is in fact a disagreement with its premisses. His own standpoint emerges as the critique progresses, but is clearly stated only at the end. John's vision is for a pluralistic society in which diversity means the recognition of other faiths as equally valid expressions of what it means to be children of God, and in which the major thrust of the church's work is to enact God's preference for the poor. He finds it disappointing that the report fails to extend its commendation of diversity to include the diversity of other faith communities – mission for John does not mean mission to members of other religions. He dislikes the report's emphasis on the Church of England, which he feels denies legitimacy to other denominations. And he feels that the concept of enculturation of fresh expressions of church within particular communities and contexts is mistaken; we should be working not to help the poor and marginalised create their own expressions of church, but to help them escape from their poverty and marginalisation. He does not however show that he has a clear concept for what this would mean in practice, nor does he discuss the relationship between his own concept of mission and the biblical understanding of mission.

One of the things that does not seem helpful is that many of John's phrases are patronising and highly value-laden – he talks about the reaffirmation of a 'territorial church' and 'proselytising' members of other faiths. He discerns a hidden 'theology of apartheid', and finds the 'complacency and insensitivity' of the report 'truly incredible'. He regards those areas where the report differs from his own understanding as 'theological weaknesses', and presents his own theology, which might seem to some to be coming from a very particular and debatable standpoint, as the (unexamined) norm. He quotes (very selectively) from the theological literature in support of his stance.

At the same time, John makes a number of good and challenging points...

Summary of his argument:

## 1. The Church, the Mission and the Kingdom

John's first point is that the report fails to distinguish clearly between the church and the mission of God. Church, mission and kingdom are confused. The church is merely an agent of mission, and the end of mission is Kingdom. Mission cannot therefore merely mean the creation of churches, which is often what comes across in the report. He argues that the report should call upon the church to manifest the kingdom of God in exhibiting the signs of the kingdom as well as through embodying the growth of the kingdom (but he doesn't turn out to mean the gifts of the Spirit, he means the enacting of God's preference for the poor – social action aimed at the elimination of poverty and marginalisation).

## 2. Does the confusion between kingdom and church matter?

John argues that the report sees the church as the mission, rather than the agent of the mission. The church should be a sign of the kingdom – exhibiting good news for the poor and the breaking down of social boundaries in the interests of justice. The report appears to identify the church with the kingdom, and to see a kingdom furthermore in which Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, humanists and atheists are crowded out. Its understanding of the CofE as a national church is 'not only unrealistic but preposterous'. Its statement that church planting and fresh expressions of church will fill the geographical and cultural gaps is tantamount to the resumption of the territorial privilege of the CofE at the expense of other churches.

## 3. The problem of diversity

John feels that the report's view of diversity is that it is a new and challenging stage in the concept of church planting; and that it treats the wider diversity of religions, values and lifestyles negatively, failing to acknowledge the enrichment of British society through the presence of other ethnicities and religious groups. With regard to members of other religions he presumes that the report 'has in mind some kind of proselytising activity'. The report's suggestion that the

church should plant churches into specific cultures he dubs a 'theology of apartheid'. It also overlooks 'one of the most prophetic insights of contemporary theology, the preferential option of God for the poor', who should not be encouraged to remain poor by having their own churches, but freed from their poverty (he doesn't say either why he thinks having their own churches will cause them to remain poor, or how he thinks some other, inclusive kind of church would free them more effectively).

#### **4. Christendom**

He suggests that the report is coming at its understanding of mission not from a study of British society and its needs, but from an analysis of what stands in the way of the typical Sunday worship pattern of the parish church. It's church-centred not need-centred. He repeats his protest that the CofE (or any Christian church) cannot pretend to be a church for all the people in England, when millions of them belong to other religions. This he sees as another instance of the report's 'indifference to the positive features of plurality, this failure to acknowledge diversity'. In his view this shows that the report is not so much moving on from Christendom as finding ways to re-establish it.

#### **6. A deuteronomic spirituality**

John believes that the report is negative and blaming in its call for repentance; it is not helpful to blame existing church members for the decline of the church, to see it in terms of the deuteronomic pattern of obedience→blessing→disobedience→punishment. The current situation should be seen in terms of cultural change, trends outside the church which are impacting on the faith. He's obviously correct in this, but not necessarily correct to view the report's call for repentance (which means change) as a moral statement of blame.

#### **7. Inculturation**

John makes the point that the report correctly says the CofE has been resistant towards the inculturation debate, persisting with its fixed ways and forms. He goes on to say that he doesn't see why the local church should wake up to these issues, as recommended in the report, but the national church should remain exempt from doing so. He applauds the call for fresh expressions of church, and agrees with the analysis that we live in a consumer society; but wonders whether locating churches in cafes because consumers like cafes is a radical enough attack on the consumer culture. He also suggests that the report fails sufficiently to acknowledge that the gospel is already present in the receiving culture prior to the arrival of explicit Christian faith. In recommending diverse forms of church in currently marginalised social contexts he feels the report is calling only for a structural change, not a conceptual or theological one. This is not enough.

#### **8. The prophetic church**

Christian mission – 'thoughtful Christians often find it quite difficult to consider what Christian faith is for, in the global and historical sense' – now we no longer adhere to the firm C19th hope that the world would be converted to Christianity. The report fails to discuss Christianity, presumably since it does not acknowledge the diversity of faiths; and it continues to view Christian faith through the eyes of the church rather than allowing the church to be viewed through the eyes of Christian faith. This is demonstrated in what it says about poverty. It is 'daring and original' in its acknowledgment that the outcome of Christian mission is that the poor receive hope and social boundaries are broken; but it turns this into an argument for keeping congregations of rich and poor people separate – a grave error, since the poor are empowered not by having their own poor churches but by escaping from poverty.

#### **Conclusion**

It is regrettable that the working party did not adopt a different approach to its task. The problem they wished to deal with is that the local parish church often seems to be stuck in a cycle of decline. But instead of looking at existing, responsible studies (eg Croft, Warren), it placed its study in the tradition of church growth and church planting movements. It would have been better titled 'Fresh Expressions of Church' or 'Varieties of Local Church'. It presents us with a vision of the whole creation moving on towards the freedom of the children of God, and then produces nothing more than the demand for more café churches. A theology of mission would take us beyond that modest hope into a consideration of the mission of the church to the nation and the world, but that cannot be developed on the slender foundation of seeking different kinds of local church.

#### **Postscript**

This is effectively John Hull's own mission statement – he longs for variety of church, but because he wants to see the CofE become a prophetic church, defined as one which refused to accept the poverty which is still so widespread in our society, that refuses to accept the marginalisation of so many disabled people, that accepts and promotes the equal ministry of men and women, seeks to eliminate from its language the long shadows of oppression, works in dialogue with other great faith traditions in establishing peace and harmony, understands and welcomes diversity, sees the face of Christ in the other, perceives the Spirit of God at work in the world outside the church, hears the Magnificat and the Sermon on the Plain, not only hears but does the word of God, and calls all into the discipleship of Jesus. *Instead, the report offers a lament over the broken territorialism of the CofE, a church that sees its mission in little more than the creation of more churches, patronises the poor, ignores diversity and clings to an imperial past. We looked for a mission-shaped church but found a church-shaped mission.*

Ouch!

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