

# Neil Hudson: Imagine Church – releasing whole-life disciples

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Notes by Alison Morgan, July 2012

Clear simple call for the need to focus on whole-life discipleship as the way forward for the church.

## Beginnings and the bigger picture

Jesus said, go and make disciples – not go and make converts, or go and make people who know quite a lot. And he'd taught them that their mission was everywhere – not just in synagogues or temple courts. But that's not our mission strategy. Mark Greene has identified the mission strategy of the worldwide church as: *'to recruit the people of God to use some of their leisure-time to join the mission initiatives of church-paid workers'*.

So this book is not about a minor change of perspective – it's a call to the church to take seriously Christ's call to nurture disciples who are learning to live out the profound implications of following him in every area of their life. MG again: *'the UK will never be reached until we create open, authentic, learning and praying communities that are focused on making whole-life disciples who live and share the Gospel wherever they relate to people in their daily lives.'*

Working with 16 pilot churches, the LICC has discovered an organic, catalytic process that could be used by any church, regardless of denomination, size, age profile or location. There are no blueprints, but there are 4 core dynamics:

1. a renewed vision of the Lordship of Jesus and the scope of the mission he calls us to
2. clarity in understanding the difference between church in its gathered and scattered forms (things we do together and things we do when apart)
3. change in the culture of the church
4. small changes which carry the whole life DNA and sustain a discipling process

## 1. God's people out there: in place – ready to go?

We need to put an end to the sacred/secular divide – where people are on a weekday morning is exactly where God wants to use them for his kingdom purposes. Does your church pray for that, or are prayer meetings just about the corporate activities of the church? Do church members realise what they are doing, and what opportunities they have? Do they know they have real missional influence and a real part in God's plans? Or is their understanding is that mission and ministry only happen when the church is gathered? A church in Dewsbury underwent a culture shift – from an attractional church which people loved being in whilst disliking what they did the rest of the week, to one where they see their daily lives as part of God's calling – even if they don't like what they do! So it's not about adding a new programme, it's about a shift of emphasis.

Five key assumptions:

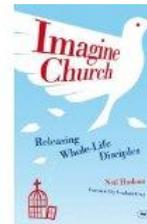
1. Churches can change – the big question is, is God still here? Start with whoever is open to change.
2. Most churches are tired of being criticised – we need a way forward, not just a diagnosis of ills
3. Changing church communities isn't easy – we need to start where we are
4. Churches only have so much energy to address issues – you can't do everything, so this has to be the key thing
5. Change won't happen if everyone thinks all is well. People need to be frustrated if church life is just about turning up to services, small groups and Alpha suppers.

Two fundamental truths:

1. Jesus is Lord of all – every element of our daily lives
2. Making whole life missionary disciples is the core vocation of the church

All our churches need to become what they were intended to be – communities of disciples who are becoming discipling. Most of our churches have concentrated on gathered church activities, at the expense of the experiences of the church in its scattered form.

*While we are concerned that people come to the church, we have not thought deeply enough about what they will become in time within the church... our commission is to disciple nations, not merely to draw large crowds to ourselves – JK Packer and G Parrett, *Grounded in the gospel*.*



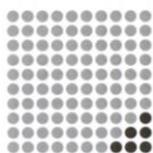
## 2. The whole-life church: a renewed vision

'Church is not something we do. It's who we are.' We focus on the gathered activities of church life – which creates the impression that the way to serve God or make a difference will be primarily through the activities of the 'official church programme'. What we do at work, with friends, in clubs, activities and other communities can easily be ignored. We may miss the significant mission that is already happening. Take one church, working with the poor in Manchester – but one member who was GP to that same community had never been asked to speak about her work, or share her experiences – what she did hadn't been seen as part of the church at work. The spare time mission of church members was seen as the only element – not the mission work of church members whose daily lives brought them into contact with those same people. Missing a trick here!

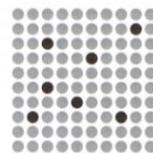
Any church can focus on making whole-life disciples – traditional, middle of road or new; fresh expression, mission-shaped community or new monastic; cathedral, community or chapel; preaching centre, worship centre, prayer centre; Soul Survivor, Keswick or Walsingham; post-evangelical, post-charismatic or neo-reformed; urban, suburban or rural.

Scripture gives us a picture of a God who is interested in every aspect of life – yet often we implicitly suggest he is most active in the gathered church meeting or in the gathered church's ministries in the community. Not all mission is corporate mission, and the NT is full of stuff about how to work, what to eat, how to be married, how to live as public citizens. Why do we read all this through a lens which assumes the gathered church is where and how God wants to work? The gathered church is important; it's where we are shaped into our new life as disciples of Jesus, so that we may live effectively in the world. This is the subject of Paul's letters to the Corinthians – they are about what life should be like as people following Jesus; helping these new Christians to extract themselves from the norms of their culture.

We need to stop thinking like this



and start thinking like this



We need to focus not on the 10 hours most people can spare for church activities, but on the 110 they spend at work, in family or leisure time (168 hours pw, of which 48 asleep and 120 remaining). This is their whole-life calling; this is their front-line mission. Front-line means the place where we realise God's calling to engage with non-Christians in mission. It may be very small – the person you care for. Or it may be large – hundreds in your workplace. It's still your front-line. Furthermore, it's on your front-line that you will be disciplined – it's where you learn to forgive, to face the difficult issues of life and relationships. Being in church is easier – but it's not our primary place of ministry. Those 10 hours are needed, to help you to be effective in the 110 hours. They are the means, not the end.

## 3. Changing from the inside out: values before actions

How do you get going – not by starting something new! It's about change of culture, not necessarily change of programme. Why do you do things the way you do them? What does doing them that way communicate? How do you say things – eg what's a missionary? What's a full time Christian worker – because we often use that when we actually mean someone in paid Christian employment. Who do we pray for up front, the young man off to Bible College or the young man with the local apprenticeship? The saying 'culture eats strategy for breakfast' means that new mission strategies won't work if you haven't changed the underlying beliefs. If you pursue new goals without realising you are operating in a way designed to deliver the old goals, little will change.

## 4. How to become a whole-life discipling church

We cannot continue as we have, where church-sponsored mission receives all our attention and the bulk of our everyday life is overlooked. The goal of a whole-life discipling church arises from the biblical conviction that Jesus is Lord of all and that the core vocation of the church is make whole-life missionary disciples. This calls for a shift in our understanding about the church. It won't be a smooth process; it takes

time to change a perspective. But once it's there, it will affect people's prayers, the church's worship, preaching, small group conversations, expectations of fruitfulness. The change process can be outlined as a circular action, where you keep revisiting and reinforcing changes that have been made earlier.



1. Cast a vision – our vision is that we will live our whole lives for the glory of God, and we will equip one another to do that faithfully and well. Find ways for people to share their everyday experiences of life on the frontline – LICC have developed a survey which helps a church explore the question 'where are we in relation to whole-life discipling and mission; where is our Christian life being lived out, and is it fruitful? Or use the DVD; or have a weekend away, or an envisioning day for leaders.
2. Focus on the frontline – places where people spend most of their time and have most contact with non Christians. Visit church members in their places of work. Listen to them talk about their everyday lives.
3. Grow a core team of clergy and laity who will model it
4. Make one-degree shifts – if you set off in an even slightly different direction you will arrive in a radically different place. Eg remodel the foyer – what kind of pictures would help people see the link between gathered worship and scattered mission? Try This Time Tomorrow. Make sure sermons have real life applications. Choose worship songs to avoid a sacred/secular bias. Pray appropriately for the scattered church. Include testimony.
5. Share stories. Celebrate fruitfulness. Help people see their lives differently.
6. Redefine the church contract – you want them to complain not that you haven't visited them but that you haven't equipped them to live as a follower of Jesus in their daily lives!

## 5. All learning together: redefining the church contract

In all the churches that have begun to take seriously the call to become whole-life disciple-making communities, the most important change has been in the relationship between the leaders and the members of the church – from a pastoral care contract to a pastoral equipping contract. Most UK churches believe it's the task of the leader to come up with the vision, and the task of the people to support it; in return, they will be cared for. We need instead to help people see that when they join a local church, they are allowing themselves to be intentionally discipled. This is the thrust of Eph 4 – the gifts given to the church are people, and the role of church leaders is not to be carers or missionaries or events managers, but to ensure that the community is a disciple-making one. We need a disciple-making contract to replace the pastoral care contract.

At the same time, we need to change the psychology of the relationship between leaders and people. Most ministers spend their time with laity in pain and laity in leadership – not laity on the frontline. S Simmel defines laity as 'those members of the church whom God has called to the church outside the walls of the church.' They write laws, invent new technologies, rear children, work in corporations, health care systems, build roads and homes, produce TV programmes – and in all that, seek to practice their faith. Leaders have to curb the temptation to make it sound as though their work is the most important work – they are just part of the body of Christ.

## 6. How the whole-life DNA changes things: three examples

Sunday mornings, coffee rotas, driving buses.

## 7. As you begin...

The challenges:

- the challenge of people recognising this is what being a Christian means
- the challenge of the inward pull of gathered church
- the challenge to the role of leaders
- the challenge of sustaining change
- the challenge of spiritual resistance

Don't wait – don't change what you are doing: just adopt a whole-life perspective.