



Editorial



Chine McDonald

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'When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place' (Acts 2.1 NRSV). This is one of my favourite passages in the Bible. It paints a picture of the followers of Christ gathered, unified, together. It is precisely when they are together that an amazing thing happens – the Holy Spirit descends and every one of them experiences something of God. From there, they go out and change the world.

A Church that fully reflects the wonderful diversity of the Trinity is one in which diversity is celebrated and strived for, in which barriers are broken down between genders and classes and races and also between generations. But we often hear that a generation is missing from the UK Church, with the profile of a stereotypical churchgoer being an older woman. Younger people are absent from churches up and down the country.

In fact, the number of 20-somethings in church has halved in just two decades. This is partly due to the fact that many young people who grew up in church leave at some point in their late teens or early 20s. Statistically, it seems, you were more likely to have survived the Titanic than have survived from childhood faith into adult faith. Engaging people in their 20s and 30s is not just a numbers game, a desperate strategy to attempt to increase representation because it is fundamental to the future of the Church, but it is important because everyone needs to be represented in the Kingdom of God. When a whole section of society is missing from our pews – whether an age bracket, those with disabilities or those from ethnic minorities – then we must do all we can to welcome them back in.

Engaging the missing generation in the Church is one of the issues closest to my heart. Various attempts have been made by today's churches to re-engage young people. Some turn to quick-fix solutions such as putting on an evening service or opting for bean bags instead of wooden pews, or changing the style of worship. But there is a fundamental change needed if we are to reach and keep these young people. We need to show young people the relevance of our faith for their daily lives. American researcher David Kinnaman explores this in his book *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians Are Leaving Church... And Rethinking Faith*: 'I think the next generation's disconnection stems ultimately from the failure of the Church to impart Christianity as a comprehensive way of understanding reality and living fully in today's culture. To many young people who grew up in Christian churches, Christianity seems boring, irrelevant, sidelined from the real issues people face. It seems shallow.'¹

But young people are not the only ones that see the Church as irrelevant. There are huge challenges facing the Church today on a number of different fronts. We are living at a time in history in which it is no longer seen as advantageous to be a Christian. Often the Church is seen as bad news rather than good news in wider society. And the language of faith is no longer understood by many. Reaching out to our communities therefore is not as easy as it once was.

A particular challenge facing churches in cities is ensuring that their congregations reflect the ethnic diversity of their local areas. But far too often,

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1. D Kinnaman, *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians Are Leaving Church And Rethinking Faith* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011), p. 114.

churches are more mono-ethnic than the streets outside their doors.

This is another subject close to my heart. I was born in Nigeria and moved to the UK with my family when I was four years old. Growing up in south-east London, we attended a number of different churches. My parents were keen that we did not just go to churches that were gatherings of Nigerian Christians like we had been used to back home. But occasionally, what faced my parents when we walked through the doors of majority white churches was questions around why we had chosen that church to visit rather than the 'black church' down the road. Tied up in issues around ethnic diversity within churches are a complex set of factors linked to immigrant communities, identity and a sense of home. As the UK has been enriched by welcoming people from many different countries and cultures, some of those people face real practical challenges – for example, finding church services in which their native language is spoken – which mean that they choose certain churches over others.

Whatever the practical challenges that drive some to stick to churches of their own cultures, the real challenge is for church leaders of all races to be welcoming to people from all backgrounds who turn up at their doors wishing to meet with God's people.

In this edition of *The Bible in Transmission* Dr Harvey Kwiyani, lecturer in African Christianity and Theology at Liverpool Hope University, explores growing churches, migration and multiculturalism in more detail. Meanwhile, Israel Olofinjana, a member of the training team at the Centre for Missionaries from the Majority World, explores the impact of black majority churches in Britain and world mission.

Both take different approaches, but what is clear in discussions around the challenges of church growth and diversity is that we must strive for our churches to be fully representative of all people. This point is made by Fr Ashley Beck in his article 'Church on the move'. Examining the issue of migration from a theological and biblical perspective, Father Beck challenges Christians to properly understand migration so that the Church as a community may more closely reflect what it means to be the people of God.

When I think about the Church in all its glory, I get excited about the potential that we have to bring God's Kingdom here to earth, to see captives set free, to see the broken-hearted healed, to see the hungry fed. And churches up and down the UK are certainly doing just that – many of them under the radar.

But being all that God has called us to be is not easy. The prevailing narrative coming from research into church attendance suggests that the Church in the UK could now be in irreversible decline. In our opening article, David Goodhew, the Director of the Centre for Church Growth Research in Durham,

raises the disturbing question as to whether this decline has, in part, theological roots. Goodhew argues that we need to be liberated from such thinking. As he says, 'Having a nuanced theology of church growth will assist churches in growing numerically, but doing so in a godly way.'

Although the prevailing narrative is of a Church in decline, the picture is perhaps a little more complex than we might think, as Dr Rhiannon McAleer, Bible Society's Head of Research, explores in her article. McAleer's statistical overview of the UK Church demonstrates that although there is decline, there are also pockets of hope, in which denominations are seeing signs of flourishing in terms of church planting and growth.

Although there are positive signs, it remains true that churches must find new and innovative ways to make sense to the world. The Great Commission is a call on Christ's followers to go into all the world and make disciples of all nations (Matthew 28.19); the New Testament often describes how more and more people were 'added to their number'. Growth is a sign of life. As Linda Rayner explains, the Fresh Expressions movement is just one of the ways in which churches are adapting to the times, changing where they meet and the way in which they do things in order to fulfil the Great Commission.

Borne out of the 2004 *Mission-shaped Church* report published by the Church of England, the Fresh Expressions movement came out of a desire to 're-imagine' church communities in light of changing culture and a society that increasingly saw the Church and Christians as irrelevant.

Another movement that has begun to emerge in recent years is Together for the Common Good. In her article, Jenny Sinclair explains how the principle of seeking the common good can untap the potential of churches, build relationships and strengthen communities.

A story we seldom hear in discussions about church growth is the signs of hope and flourishing taking place within rural churches. But it is time to tell a new story, writes Jill Hopkinson. I hope you too will be encouraged by the stories she tells of rural churches growing in depth and discipleship, but also in numbers.

In this issue of *The Bible in Transmission*, we could have approached the challenges facing UK Church growth in a number of different ways. The articles here are not exhaustive, but attempt to begin to paint a picture of some of the main challenges faced by the Church.

In the image accompanying this article, there is a set of steps – the climb looks daunting and challenging, but it's a journey that must be made – and imagine how great it will feel once we have got to the top. We hope that this edition will provide some challenge to you, but also hope that you will be encouraged by the signs of life there are across the UK Church.