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Changing church

by Martin Robinson

As I write these few words, the drums of the Ghanaian Church reverberate rhythmically in my memory. During a recent visit, I was struck with the sheer vibrancy of the Church in Ghana. Whether Presbyterian or Pentecostal, Methodist or Moravian, Salvationist or Seventh Day Adventist, the Church in Africa represents a powerful and lively force in many nations. During my visit I asked church members, church leaders and ex-patriot missionaries about the relationship of the Church to the culture. I wanted to know which was having the bigger impact on the other. Every single person that I asked was convinced that the Church was having more impact on the culture than the culture on the Church.

One or two missionaries spent longer reflecting on this question. They suggested that they had seen a huge change in the last thirty years. Some leaders to whom I spoke felt that they could not have made such a bold claim thirty years ago. Not that the Church in Ghana is problem free. Rural churches are losing young people in the drift to the cities. The downturn in the economy has hit finances hard. Social problems, the onslaught of Aids, the gullibility of many in the face of religious fraudsters all take their toll. But somehow amidst all of these challenges the Church is growing, vital and hopeful.

I mention this recent experience merely to remind myself that our own experience of a western church dented in its confidence is not the universal situation of the Church. I also need reminding that situations

can change and change dramatically. Ninety years ago, the Church in Britain was more sure of its influence in society than it is today. Thirty years ago in Ghana the Church was not enjoying the strength of influence that it has today. The future of the Church cannot be predicated on the basis of our current experience. The nature of the Christian hope as well as our own experience of life tells us that the future can be very different from the past.

The question of what the Church of the future might look like is a recurrent theme in this edition of *TransMission*. Part of the background to the various contributions is the evidence, statistical and anecdotal, that the Church in Britain is in decline. Something needs to be different if the Church is going to grow and have a significant impact on the culture in which we live. The nature of that "something" is reflected on by each of our authors in very different ways. I invite you to enter into those reflections and add three thoughts of my own.

First, our sense of gloom is often reinforced by the publication of surveys which suggest an ever downward spiral. Stephen Cottrell suggests that the figures may not reflect the total situation accurately. My own experience would tend to agree with that of Stephen. That is not to dismiss surveys as worthless so much as to issue them with at least a partial health warning. In particular the phrase "if present trends continue" should be treated carefully. If we know anything at all from history it is that present trends rarely do continue. The

feeling that we are in the grip of malign forces which we cannot alter stands in complete contrast with the gospel hope that we proclaim.

Second, renewal usually comes from the margins and rarely, if ever, begins at the centre. That is why looking at new forms of the Church can be so prophetically inspirational. It is not that there are easy answers which can be studied and adopted. Rather, the very fact that the Church is experimenting is evidence itself of a different and vital future even if the actual experiments are themselves only bridges to a new future.

Third, there is increasing evidence that there is a spiritual revival in our culture. That is not the same thing as seeing the Church grow. But most observers report that the spiritual climate is possibly more receptive now than it has been for many decades. There is an understandable if regrettable tendency for many church leaders to want to look for programmes and possibly even products that will tap into such receptivity and bring easy and painless growth. As Janice Price's article illustrates, the path towards the future mission of the Church will be more complex than simply the adoption of new programmes.

The missionaries who first arrived on the shores of the Gold Coast and who died of malaria were not daunted by the phrase "if present trends continue". Their zeal pointed them to a God who continually confounds our expectations as he pours out his Spirit in new pentecosts beyond our imaginations. ■