

New ways of being church

by Anne Wilkinson-Hayes

The attendance figures seem to suggest that church isn't working for far too many people. We cannot avoid the necessity of change. We need to ask the question "what is church?" and then offer some new models, suggests Anne Wilkinson-Hayes.



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Recently three people in my church have asked for baptism. We are all thrilled. We are thrilled for them, and we are also thrilled for ourselves – we must be doing something right! So we convince ourselves that it is worthwhile struggling on, trying to maintain the familiar ways of being church. However we all know the statistics, we all know the current climate. Church isn't working. It fails to touch the vast majority of our population. We cannot avoid the necessity of change.

A few years ago I began looking for alternative expressions of church life. I explored Christian communities and then broadened out to consider looser mission-focused groups, alternative worship gatherings, groups that evolved into churches unintentionally, and groups that have consciously reinvented themselves. I discovered that there is significant hope and inspiration to be found in these, often very fragile, new beginnings.

Before we consider some of the snapshots, we need to face the question "What is church?" Many of the groups I have looked at do not consider themselves "church" because their understanding of that term

is shaped by a different set of theological and ecclesiological principles. My guiding framework emerged from an article written by the Early Church historian Alan Kreider¹. He asked the question "Why did the Church grow at its fastest rate in the first four centuries?" His research discovered that there were no recorded evangelistic strategies, and that worship usually excluded unbelievers, so the sort of activities that have been in vogue over the last decade, namely missions and seeker services, were not instrumental. The first key factor was a deep expression of inclusive community. People were amazed by the love Christians had for one another, which broke all the normal social barriers. The second was the degree of service the Christians offered to the wider community. They were noted as caring for widows and orphans, assisting with funerals and being present in times of need. The third factor was a distinctive lifestyle. The early Christians refused to take up arms; they eschewed certain practices and festivals; they sought to live simply and share their belongings. These three factors fascinated unbelievers and Kreider asserts that the Church

grew so remarkably by fascination.

These observations seem relevant for two reasons. Firstly, the early Church consciously tried to live out the values of Jesus, and their life was closest to the biblical basis we strive to model ourselves upon. Secondly, we are currently in post-Christendom and non-Christendom models are a useful starting point for considering how to be church in such an era. Thus for me, “church” needs to reflect a sense of community, a commitment to social transformation and a measure of alternative living that in some way challenges the status quo.

As I describe some of the situations I have been privileged to visit, I am very conscious that the stories are not mine to tell, and that I have only gained fleeting impressions. Some stories reflect situations that have now changed radically. Experiments are often fragile and short-lived but the story still has validity and truth and remains an offering to the wider community. It is my hope that the broad brushstrokes will catalyse imaginations and sow seeds of new possibilities.

Some of the interesting models never set out to become church at all. They have evolved from groups of Christians who simply engaged in relevant mission.

Living Proof in Cardiff grew from a house group on an estate. Members prayed to have a clear sense of what God wanted them to do. They began a small youth club and over the years they have developed a wide-ranging programme involving teaching life skills in local schools, and running a network of summer schools that bring them into contact with more than 1,500 children.

Living Proof has a clear Christian ethos combined with high professional standards. It has gained them wide approval for the difference they are making among a particularly disenfranchised group of young people. The shift from community project to church came imperceptibly as young people became Christians and could not find local churches to settle in. They started asking to come to the staff prayer meeting,

and soon outgrew the house setting and now meet in a community centre. A church had been born and the leaders had to be trained to nurture it. It has its own style and practices that are relevant to its mission focus.

The Hope Community has very different origins. Three Roman Catholic sisters were asked by the local parish church in Wolverhampton to conduct a community survey on a nearby housing estate. The sisters spent each day listening to the pain of the inhabitants on the estate. The estate had all the highest indicators for levels of urban deprivation, and people felt depressed and marginalised. The sisters felt increasingly uncomfortable returning to their convent each evening and eventually secured a maisonette on the third floor of one of the tower blocks. Their belief was that community creates community and that in some way God could use their life of shared prayer for the good of the people on the estate. They did not set out to begin anything, but gradually, as relationships developed, local people took initiatives. Literacy classes, holidays for children who had never before left the city, IT training and a higher level of interest and care between the residents, were just some of the positive effects.

The third floor gradually became the effective chapel for the estate. Local people began an estate service. They found voices to articulate faith they never knew they had. Church, by my criteria, although not shared publicly by the sisters, has happened and is changing lives.

Other initiatives have been more intentional.

The Eagle’s Nest in Ramsgate has developed from the Pioneer strand of the house church or new church movement. A group felt that the authority structures of such churches were unhelpful to those who were already damaged by oppressive relationships. The Eagle’s Nest was deliberately named to reflect their desire to provide a safe place to care for people who were hurting. The nest was a place where healing could take place. However, it was not a place to stay in. The group has a very radical view

that they have failed in their mission if they grow. If they grow, it means that people are not being launched out of the nest; they are not finding their wings. Their aim is that people will find healing and then be helped in the community to discern the call of Christ to move out in new directions. Church thus becomes a place of transience and transition, rather than an end in itself.

Urban Expression is a network of small Christian groups living in under-churched areas of east London. They have resisted calling themselves anything, until local people begin to name them. They recognise that “church” as a name carries a lot of unhelpful baggage for people. They simply want to get to know locals through natural links such as work and school and seek to be a positive asset in the area. They have cleaned windows and picked up litter; been involved in local football competitions and youth work. They aim to gradually invite people to meals and for them to stay for worship around the table. In Shadwell the vision of church is house-sized and the aim is to begin new household communities once one gets too big.

The Church of the Saviour in Washington DC is a long-established church plant. It asks three questions: What is the mission? What is the community needed to support that mission? What are the spiritual disciplines needed to support that particular community in that mission?

What has developed is a church of nine different mission congregations that serve a needy area of the city. Each is quite distinctive. One is a hospital for street people recovering from substance abuse, another is a housing association and another is a coffee and bookshop. Each has their own appropriate style of worship and activities. What links them as one church is the shared teaching and discipleship programme run by another congregation, the Servant Leadership School. This model could provide a relevant way forward for our city-centre churches.

There are many other fascinating examples one could give, such as churches in pubs

and workplaces, but there are some common threads emerging.

The first is that the future for the church is much more varied. It will be increasingly difficult to point out churches in the landscape, other than those that remain as architectural monuments. However, the social effectiveness and the evangelistic witness of the church, as a more hidden movement, may be more pronounced at a local level.

The future is relational and in general the models seem to be small. Eating together seems to be a key component and a natural forum for faith-sharing. This should not surprise us if we are recovering our early Church roots, where communion was much less symbolic and conducted in the context of a full meal together.

Mission and a commitment to improving life for others is critical to the shape of these models and the outward focus becomes the key component which shapes worship and community life, rather than previously when the worship was considered the pivotal feature, or the primary way into being church.

Several of the situations visited have children at the heart of their life. A group in Deptford run Children's Church, a gathering that is led by children and supported by adults. It is interesting what happens when Jesus' words about allowing a little child to lead us into the Kingdom of God are put into practice. Enabling the vulnerable and the marginalised to be at the core of church life is a practice that fundamentally affects the way we do church.

Leadership models are challenged by these less formal gatherings because activity is more shared and participative. It is interesting that many of the new ways of being church are currently led by women. Leadership will need to learn from their approaches.

New ways of being church present many challenges and there are obvious losses as well as gains, but people are recognising that new forms are needed. We need to watch the margins; the inner cities, the rural areas, where creative approaches are emerging, often born in despair.

When desperation forces us to let go of the old ways God can bring new life.

Notes

¹ Alan Kreider, *Worship and Evangelism in Pre-Christendom* (Joint Liturgical Studies 32, Cambridge: Grove Books, 1995.)