

Preparing the Church for mission

by Janice Price

The Church is not a club existing primarily to serve its members, but a community whose purpose is always to look outwards to those who are not yet part of it. This is a complex and sometimes painful task, writes Janice Price, but it is both important and possible...



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“I believe the best description of mission is that God wants the Church to exist for those who are not – or who are not yet – its members.”

This adaptation of Archbishop Temple’s famous definition of the Church in mission has become the working definition adopted by the Diocese of Worcester as we embark on the complex and sometimes painful journey of preparing for mission.

What does it mean for a church “to exist for those who are not – or who are not yet – its members”? It means that we are not here just for ourselves but to take our part in God’s mission in the world. In other words, we are not a club existing primarily to serve our members’ interests but a community whose purpose is always to focus outwards to those who are not yet part of us.

“Great words,” you might be saying, “but in my church it isn’t so easy: We have an expensive building to maintain; we have to raise funds constantly to pay our way; we can’t possibly give any to missions; we are a dwindling congregation of people who are getting older”. I have heard all of these objections to mission many times in the last few weeks, as I have been working with churches in both rural and urban settings. And, even in some of the large thriving churches there is an underlying attitude that focuses on “our life

together” at the expense of “those who are not – or who are not yet – our members”.

Even though all of the above concerns are real, I am beginning to detect a change, and I have seen it in this diocese and in churches I worked with previously. People *are* wanting to move on. Many are at various points of realising that old ways of being are not going to sustain us in the future. But the time is a painful one because many churches are not sure how to transform church for its next stage of life. It is a period in the cycle of change that is confusing, de-skilling, painful and chaotic.

We are, as change consultant William Bridges has described it, “in the neutral zone”, or to use a more familiar image, in the wilderness. This is the place between endings and new beginnings, where we feel vulnerable, scattered, displaced, where we grieve the loss of the familiar but are not yet ready to embrace new possibilities and ways of living. Indeed, some would rather go back to Egypt and not move on to the promised land at all. However, contained within the chaos are the shoots of new life and the creativity that will give direction for the future. We feel these things as individuals and as communities and each impacts on the other.

One of the key issues in preparing the Church for mission is to understand the

processes of change and to help our churches to do likewise. How, for example, do we balance those who are ready to move ahead quickly, who are keen to dream and implement new ideas, alongside those who just cannot move at the same pace? More and more in my experience these are the questions people are asking and trying to understand. This is painful, but where the pain is most acute the potential for change and growth is most great. For maximum growth to occur, we must identify where the pain is keenest and work there.

The greatest resource of all in this process is the Exodus story – essentially a story about change and transition. Take people on a reflective journey through this story and you will enable them to enter the experience of the wilderness and then move beyond and see God at work in the midst of change – a God who is not perplexed by change (indeed it is written into the laws of the universe) and yet who is changeless. Another resource that is particularly helpful is *Managing Transitions – Making the Most of Change* by William Bridges. Referred to earlier, this jargon-free guide outlines the processes of change clearly and in ways which can be easily applied to church life.

Why is it so difficult to prepare the church for mission? One of the reasons is that we are

asking Christians to go against what feels natural. We naturally join with others who think, enjoy or believe the same or similar things. It is much harder to live with, and speak of what we hold important with, those whose perspectives differ perhaps profoundly from our own. What happens when we do mission, scattered in places of work, home, wherever, is that we confront and are confronted by those who are very different. Mission is about relationship despite difference. Being missionary people means coming out of our comfort zones and moving in areas of difference, listening to the stories of others, changing and being changed by them.

It is alright to speak of mission as being natural for a Christian but the reality is often very different. So different at times that it feels like trying to move against the forces of gravity. The theological motif which provides the foundation for the Church in mission is the Trinity, where the life of Father, Son and Spirit within the Godhead moves outwards towards the world in a spiral movement. As David Bosch in *Transforming Mission*¹ describes it, "Mission is thereby seen as a movement from God to the world; the church is viewed as an instrument for that mission. There is church because there is mission, not vice versa. To participate in mission is to participate in the movement of God's love toward people, since God is a fountain of sending love."

We have to admit that at times our mission and evangelism has felt more like the popular picture of the English person abroad – shouting louder and louder in the hope and expectation they will be understood. But using the *Missio Dei* with church groups really works. It releases people from the burden of thinking mission is something *they* have to do, rather than participating in what is essentially God's love and life. This is a million miles away from the common perception of mission or evangelism as loud, persistent shouting from the roof tops.

One of the ways to move beyond this impasse is for the

church to re-learn the art of listening to and telling stories. In a culture where experience carries more weight than propositional truth, the telling of stories, which relate our experiences of faith and life, will open up dialogue. The value of the storytelling approach is confirmed by, among others, Bible Society's storytelling initiative in partnership with the Northumbria Community that continues to grow apace.

Over the last four years, I have been developing an approach entitled *Telling Our Faith Story*. It is a process devised to encourage Christians to get in touch with their own faith experience and to talk about it, initially within the church community, to build confidence, and then beyond it. It is like learning to drive a car. Initially, we need to have the help of the driving instructor and the dual controls. But at some time we need to move beyond this onto the wide open road.

In this process a number of things have hit me forcibly. Let me describe some of them.

There is no lack of God-experience. Christians have very rich faith journeys, often forged in the midst of pain and sorrow, that will communicate clearly. The problem is that they don't easily talk about such experiences. Either the experiences are too deep or there just aren't the words for such times. In addition, many Christians lack the necessary self-esteem to relay faith and experiences, or they fear not being listened to or taken seriously. The latter is the greater fear. Christians just don't expect their journey to be taken seriously, particularly by those in church leadership. They fear that significant God-experience will be trampled upon and disregarded or, even worse, thought of as "unsound" or "in error".

It is perhaps more likely that those outside the Church will both understand and listen to the faith journey of a Christian non-judgementally than will those who exercise the ministry of Christian leadership. This may be hard to hear, but in my experience it is true.

What happens when we

share stories is that the old comfort zones of churchmanship, denomination, doctrine or theological training are removed and we find we are on a level playing field where experience speaks to experience. This is not to say that doctrine and theology are unimportant. Quite the contrary: they are the map for the journey. But when they act as unrecognised default positions they stop us from hearing that which is other. At that point, we stop being churches for anyone beyond our own door. A church in mission has to learn to tell the story – God's story and our story – in ways that relate.

I am often asked if I have hope for the Church in the future. My answer is a definite yes. Even though we live in bewildering times, this isn't the first time the Church has faced difficult circumstances. For 2000 years Christianity has been arguing with, accommodating and adjusting, often all at the same time, to the cultures it has lived among. However, throughout its history there has come a point when some have decided to follow God in radical obedience and with an openness to change that takes God's people into new places and new possibilities. People who come to mind are Moses, Martin Luther, Desmond Tutu, John Wesley and, indeed, Jesus himself. Such is the vision and obedience required to prepare the Church for mission today. ■

Notes

¹ *Transforming Mission*, David Bosch, (Orbis, 1991) page 390

Suggested resources

Telling Our Faith Story by Janice Price (Church House Publishing, 1999, £2.95)

Managing Transitions by William Bridges (Nicholas Brealey Publishing, £10.99, ISBN 1-85788-112-5.)