

## EDITORIAL

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**THE REVD DR MARTIN ROBINSON** is Director of Mission and Theology at Bible Society. He is a minister in the Churches of Christ and regularly lectures and writes on mission and contemporary culture. Among his most important books are *The Faith of the Unbeliever* and *Winning Hearts, Changing Minds*. His most recent book is *Rediscovering the Celts; the true witness from western shores*.



**IT IS NOW ALMOST 40 YEARS SINCE THE SINGER/SONGWRITER BOB DYLAN ASSAILED US WITH THE COMMENT “YOU’D BETTER START SWIMMING OR YOU’LL SINK LIKE A STONE, FOR THE TIMES THEY ARE A CHANGING”.** The depth and extent of the social and cultural change that has impacted the western world – and through globalisation the whole world – is only now becoming clear. We live in a time when cherished values, certainties and assumptions are being questioned, abandoned and debated to the point where there is no longer much agreed ground upon which our culture can stand. The Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster was surely correct when he claimed that Christianity as a backdrop to the everyday decisions of people in Britain has almost been vanquished.

That is not the same as to claim that Christianity itself has been overcome, but it is to declare that the Christian community is facing challenges that can sometimes feel overwhelming. How then might we rise to such challenge? This edition of *TransMission* seeks to address this considerable challenge and makes a number of significant points.

First, we need to remind ourselves that there are no easy answers in the midst of such difficulties. There is no single method, programme or approach that we might advocate that alone will lead to the regeneration of the Christian cause. It is important to recognise that we are on a journey of discovery, exploration and debate. Such a journey requires that we draw deeply upon the collective resources of our imagination, intellectual rigour, spiritual depth and Christian tradition. Together we then need to engage in a wide-ranging debate about the future of the Church and its missionary engagement with our world.

Second, it is important to remind ourselves that there is nothing inevitable about the decline of the Church. However difficult our circumstances, the history of the Church suggests that its renewal of life and faith is indeed possible. Renewal of the Church is part of our missionary mandate and has often taken place at the margins and rarely from the centre. Simon Jenkins points to the possible importance of the internet in this regard and invites us to consider the lessons that we might learn from that particular debate.

Third, we need to remember that there are many people of goodwill who do not identify themselves as Christians, but who are sympathetic to the need of the Christian community to make its contribution to a broad debate about the future of our world. The key question as to the kind of people we need to be occupies the interest and attention of many beyond the boundaries of the Church. Bryan Appleyard rightly draws attention in his article to the importance of these issues. He encourages us to move beyond a fascination with technology to a consideration of deeper human and social questions.

Fourth, the resource of the Bible as a repository of wisdom, vision and creativity is a potential treasure which can help us to recover what Rowan Williams has referred to as “lost icons” in the popular imagination. Stephen Timms reminds us of the way in which the founders of Bible Society drew upon such a resource in order to construct a progressive social movement in an earlier century.

Neil Crosbie, Ann Holt and Kathy Hasler interact with these questions by raising the question of campaigning for the voice of the Bible in our contemporary culture. It is clear in their articles that to engage in such a campaign is not a simple matter. While Christians might easily agree that to campaign for the voice of the Bible to be heard in our society is laudable, it is not easy to see what such a campaign might actually look like.

In the maelstrom in which we find ourselves we do not yet have a clear clarion call to a particular solution, but it could be argued that we are at least beginning to swim rather than to sink. There is evidence that the emerging Church of the twenty-first century is beginning to grapple with difficult questions in ways that are serious and significant.

In the midst of statistics which speak of the unremitting decline of the Church it is vital to remind ourselves that in the past few decades thousands of people have become Christians. Perhaps we will look back on this time as one in which the Church became a community to which people belonged because of a deep and profound faith, as compared with a mere cultural affinity.

These are all questions that come to the Church because it is, and must be, a missionary community. They are not new questions. The letter to Diognetus (quoted in *Missional Church*, Edited by Darrell L. Guder, p 120, Eerdmans, 1998) in the second century reflects something of the task to which we aspire:

“Christians are not differentiated from other people by country, language or customs; you see, they do not live in cities of their own, or speak some strange dialect, or have some peculiar lifestyle.

“They live in both Greek and foreign cities, wherever chance has put them. They follow local customs in clothing, food and the other aspects of life. But at the same time they demonstrate to us the wonderful and certainly unusual form of their own citizenship.

“They live in their own native lands, but as aliens; as citizens, they share all things with others; but like aliens suffer all things. Every foreign country is to them as their native country, and native land as a foreign country.” ■