

# A MISSION AGENDA FOR THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY CASTING A VISION FOR PUBLIC LIFE



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**THE CHURCH IN THE WEST HAS BEEN GOING THROUGH A TORRID TIME.** Many ministers are seriously concerned about the future. So what should our agenda be for the twenty-first century? I believe there are real opportunities about to present themselves, but that to capitalise on them the Church will have to undergo radical change.

There is a new openness in our society. For centuries now the Christian faith has been under fire from all quarters, accused of being less than fully rational or scientific. Many churches have responded by withdrawing from the public arena, concentrating solely on the individual relationship with God and making pronouncements on personal morality. Some have centred on inner experience, others on incontrovertible doctrine, but almost all have lost real touch with the society around them. Yet the tide has turned. The advent of postmodernism may have caused great confusion, but it has settled one thing for good. The extent and certainty of expert knowledge has been overstated. Science and reason cannot solve all our problems for us.

Proper philosophical analysis points to the importance of narrative in any society as people try to make sense of human behaviour. The minds of others are hidden from us. To make sense of the behaviour of others we have imaginatively to enter into their minds and tell a story about why they do what they do. All such stories will necessarily be underlain by beliefs and commitments. For example, with BSE, global warming, foot and mouth disease and a host of other modern problems, we see science simply as playing a part in a whole process of public conversation. We are aware that the power of vested interest in business or politics continually impinges on our understanding of the right way to proceed.

The business people have their perspective, given expression in their stories, which take their part in the appeal for what is right. Politicians likewise struggle from their various perspectives. So any society is concerned with processes by which it seeks truth, processes that include scientific understanding, narratives told from different perspectives and various forms of analysis. The health of any society actually lies in the quality of the public conversations that feed into its decisions. There is no reason whatever why stories from a faith perspective should not take a proper and respected place in such conversations. That is our opportunity. Much about life cannot be settled by recourse to theory alone. Life in the future is going to require moving our focus from theory to process.

The big issue for the Church is that we need to change our own methodology. The world will not primarily look to us

for a pronouncement, a “once and for all” theory, about what is right. Rather our society might look for the Church to play its part in a process where truth and right are being sought. Governments will attempt to “consult” on a wide range of issues. The challenge will then be to talk about what we believe in terms that significantly overlap with the concerns of society.

Our churches are currently set up for an “expert” learning model. Our primary means of Christian education remains the sermon, whose model is that of the expert lecturing the ignorant people. This will no longer do. Instead the focus must change to active learning within our churches. We learn of God in the process of life. Our working life must become an acknowledged arena of Christian learning and engagement. The experience of Christians in the workplace must be honoured within the Church. The means by which this can occur is by utilising new forms of dynamic and interactive Christian education that build upon real experiences of life. Similarly, Christian people need to become politically literate and the best means of achieving this is by real political involvement.

New models of learning will eventually require structural change. Our problem is that we are very clearly hooked into the present Sunday event with its dominant leadership style and a congregation whose only active role is singing. Both ministers and people consider this “church”. The very identity and self-worth of the ministers hinges around this weekly event, and so does the income. So how can we change? Is change actually possible? Perhaps the key is to imagine and implement complementary activities that will encourage active learning, real engagement with the society and which will raise new money, without threatening the perceived core activities. Later, when alternatives are established and clearly both beneficial and faithful, the Church might adjust its structures. The structural challenge is to move from a static to a fluid model of organisation.

The traditional “local” church is looking increasingly anachronistic. Technological progress in communication and advances in mobility mean that the geographical reach of our lives extends far beyond the small area in which we live, and group life generally is more fluid and less committed. Political parties, trade unions, uniformed organisations and Sunday schools are all far weaker in the modern environment. Yet churches have generally not changed their strategies. Perhaps we are hoping that the modern world will go away! Well it won't. We will need to adapt and if we do so we could be of immense value to society.

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The real challenge that society will face in the new social situation will be that of maintaining its integrity. We have gone through the equivalent of a phase change, as when ice becomes water, in terms of our relationships with one another. Yet the much more fluid reality of today's interpersonal relationships poses a subtle threat to society. All social systems are actually systems of trust and such trust is upheld by the quality of human relationship. There are already signs that this trust is breaking down. "Where there's blame, there's a claim" announces the Accident Company from its barrow in the city centre. Such compensation culture is just one indication of the general weakening of trust that has given rise to widespread political disillusionment and a general sense of alienation. Aware of the problem, the government has put in train a set of new initiatives including Citizenship Education in schools, legislation about public consultation and new local area decision making. The aim is to rebuild trust and an adequate solidarity in the new, much more open and fluid environment. Each of these presents the Church with new opportunities. Maintaining a presence in the "local community" means that churches might play key roles in developing new relationships with local authorities and schools as society seeks to put in place new social structures to rebuild trust and maintain integrity.

Yet involvement is not enough, is it? We need to see the place of our faith and our Scriptures in this new environment. We would ask how our contribution will be distinctive; how might it witness to our faith and to the reality of God? These are important questions. The twenty-first century is not going to listen to dogmatic pronouncements from us, or from anybody else for that matter, but what it will do is let us join in with the whole process of seeking what is true and right. I have mentioned that "story" is now on the public agenda. The new social environment will welcome our stories, both our personal experiences of life perceived from a faith perspective and our inherited stories. I would suggest that we need to reintroduce our society to the Bible simply as an attempt by a community of people over time to make sense of their lives in terms of there being a God.

This God was understood to be the source of all that they strove for, of goodness, beauty and truth. This God was in authority and in relationship with the people. Such was the belief that shaped the biblical narratives. The whole structure of this belief meant that the search to know God was also the search to know what a good society would look like. It means that the Scriptures contain all sorts of positive and negative lessons about commercial, political,

moral, legal and religious social systems. We need to understand these stories in terms of the process of their formation, the struggle within the Scriptures for truth and right and the revelation of God that proceeded from that struggle.

In that way the process of Scripture formation becomes a parallel with the process of seeking truth and right today and something of immense relevance to our society as we continue to wrestle with the age-old problems of working with our human nature. When people sense the relevance of our stories they will begin seriously to ask questions about whether the underlying belief in God is also true. ■