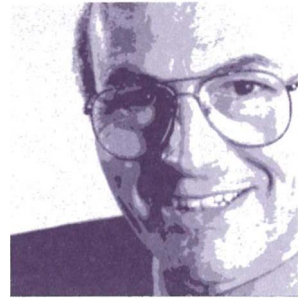


# EDITORIAL

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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 *To Win the West*. His most recent book is *Rediscovering the Celts; the true witness from western shores*.



A FEW YEARS AGO, THE BBC SCREENED A MAJOR DOCUMENTARY ON THE TWENTIETH CENTURY CALLED “THE PEOPLE’S CENTURY”. Some critics at the time suggested that a better descriptor of the 20<sup>th</sup> century might have been “The Dictators’ Century” since dictatorship and not democracy has been the experience of much of humanity in the century past. My criticism of both these titles is that they represent a very Western perspective.

From a global perspective it would be just as possible to describe the 20th century as “The Christian Century”. Certainly, in the past 100 years Christianity has emerged as a truly global faith, significantly present on every continent on earth. Those who have the privilege of experiencing Christianity around the world must be struck by its diversity of cultural expression and by the vigour of the Church in so many parts of the world. Christianity at its best and most dynamic is essentially a people movement rather than a well ordered ecclesiastical machine.

It is against the background of a diverse and growing global Church that we need to begin an assessment of its situation in the West. It is sometimes tempting for Western Christians to assume that the problems currently being experienced by the Church in Europe and other Western lands will soon start to impact the Church elsewhere as modernity and post-modernity bites into an emerging global culture. It is just as tempting for Christians in other lands to assume that if only the Western Church looked like the dynamic churches of Africa and elsewhere that the problems of the Church in Europe would soon be overcome. As with most sweeping assumptions there is a measure of truth and falsehood in both perspectives. The inevitable connection between the Church and its surrounding culture means that it is simply not possible or indeed helpful in the West simply to ape the structures and life of the Church in other cultures.

That does not mean that we in the West have nothing to learn from the Church Universal. Perhaps the most pressing challenge is for us to ask the question, “how might it be possible for the Church in the West to become a genuine people movement?” Such a question cannot be addressed by looking at the Church in isolation from its cultural context.

The researcher Loren Mead has made the telling point that “...the most important factor in the drop-out (in church attendance) is not something that the churches are doing or not doing; it is the character of the culture surrounding the congregations.”

He goes on to comment: “The information is startling and dismaying to church leaders. It suggests that the things we know how to do best have little to do with who stays or who goes. We know how to develop programmes. Apparently the population is not interested in programmes. It suggests that the very way we organise ourselves to respond to the problem of church drop-outs may have very little impact on the people who drop out. The cultural environment may be more determinative to membership losses than the character of what the congregation is and does...”

“... In the area of membership losses, we are not dealing with something that is responsive to a new programme – even a very good programme. We are engaged in a basic interaction between religious institutions and the nature of our social environment. The researchers have lifted the problem to a new level of difficulty and called us to move beyond our narrow answers to address larger issues than we have heretofore had the guts to face.

“...we do not need a new set of programmes. We need churches with a new consciousness of themselves and their task. The structures we have inherited have shown little capacity for such radical rethinking of their identity.”

It is this dual task of seeking to shape a contemporary cultural engagement of the gospel on the one hand and renewing the life of the Church in terms of its internal consciousness to which we are called.

This edition of *The Bible in TransMission* seeks to address these two key questions. The articles fall into two broad categories. The first series of articles seeks to address the issue of the Church in its cultural context while the second attempts to describe ways in which the Church might respond in terms of its congregational forms to its missionary calling. ■