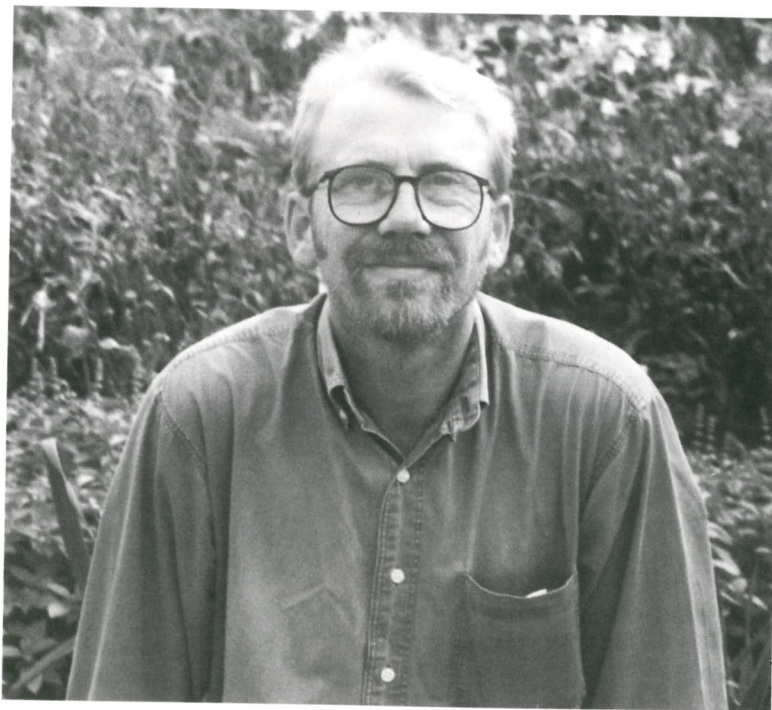


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Eternity: Incarnation with the 18–35s

by Robin Gamble

There is no disputing the fact that “Generation X” is deserting and ignoring the churches. Its mobile and rootless culture is difficult for the Church to understand and engage with. Here, Robin Gamble describes how a project called “Eternity” was begun in Bradford to reach this neglected age group. Far from simply being an “alternative worship” movement, it is developing into an integrated missionary programme that is incarnational rather than institutional, and is enabling the people involved to grow in the Christian faith.

The timing was perfect. The former Archbishop of Canterbury, Robert Runcie, had just gone public on his abhorrence of experimental type services. We were just about to go public with our (yes, you guessed it) experimental type service, being held in no less a place than Bradford Cathedral. It was Christmas-come-early for the media, and we were the turkey on the plate. We had our 15 seconds of Warhol-esque fame and suddenly everybody wanted to know all about “Eternity”.

People and Experience

“Eternity” is not the usual alternative service event. It is a three-cord project attempting to build effective evangelism, teaching and worship in and amongst the 18–35s – the notorious “Generation X”. There are two key principles underlying “Eternity”. First, people count. Second, meeting Jesus Christ is an incarnational experience. We are not particularly interested in alternative worship or liturgical experimentation in itself, we are first and foremost about people.

When we plan an event, contacts are more important than content. We are working with a particular group of people, we seek to be incarnational in entering into their music, their free and easy time scale, their pub and leisure culture.

Believing Lots of Things

“Generation X” is not a uniform cultural group (just like all generations). There are numerous groups and subgroups. There are, however, a few common features. They are fairly easygoing and laid-back people. Their lifestyle, dress sense and relationships are usually casual, comfortable and flexible. Things sort of come and go for them without any big deal. They are open and easy to chat to. “Generation Xers” tend to avoid heavy commitments, be they financial, political or religious.

Despite this they tend to believe lots of things, in fact just about everything from alien invaders to the spirituality of the dinosaurs is acceptable and seriously cool. Fast food, TV and video, football, pop music and drink are all very important.

Drifting Culture

"Eternity" began two years ago with Dave Banbury (the young and trendy half of our double act) and myself realizing that from the Christian point of view "Generation X" is the missing generation. In today's Church we are good with kids, getting better with families, and strong with the middle-aged upwards. That leaves a big crack somewhere in the middle. The 18-35s, who are not part of the "family service" or toddlers scene, are falling down the crack. They are the hardest people to get into churches and the easiest to lose. It has something to do with their own drifting type of culture, but it is also a lot to do with the Church's failure to recognize and respond to their needs and preferences.

Ambience and Feeling

Our three-cord project started with worship. Worship that uses pictures, symbols, music, contrasts of light and dark, noise and quiet, with lots of mood ambience and feeling. Although we use few words, we do still retain a place for preaching and a bit of singing; oh, and very importantly, the "religious bit" is always followed by the "pub bit". Put the two together and we think you get the full "Jesus bit". For our worship events we have always tried to use suitably atmospheric types of church. However, this has now become impossible, and we are just about to move into a fairly *avant garde* type of theatre. We started out with a list of Christian contacts, asked them to bring their friends, did top class publicity and kept a very strict age control.

Friendship

After a year or so of monthly worship events, we perceived a

need for teaching and fellowship. Thus the second cord of the project came into existence. We are just about to hold our second weekend away together. Friendship, bonding and strong, radical teaching are the key features of this weekend work, supplemented by the odd "teach in" in a local pub room.

Evangelism

The third cord is evangelism. At Christmas we staged two "Bad Hair Happenings" (following the churches' national advertising campaign) in night-clubs, where the Christmas message was presented in a very fast-moving, fun type of way. "Oasis at the Cross" was our second attempt at staging an evangelistic event. This was multimedia, presentational evangelism, easy to invite friends to, and held in a non-Christian venue with the bars open. On this occasion a direct evangelistic appeal was offered and things happened.

People not Programmes

Dave Banbury and I are both from a fairly modern, urban and evangelical neck of the woods. Our experience and knowledge was greatly broadened by the addition of Tom Meyrick, a young Anglo-Catholic curate. A creative team has built up around the three of us, with a committed core of perhaps 50 regular attenders plus a vague, floating fringe. In two years we have learned more than we have achieved; our mistakes outnumber our successes. We have tried to draw the attention of the churches right across Bradford to a vital issue, and focused attention on a previously neglected group of people. We retain our foundational values that mission is about people not programmes, and that real Christianity is incarnational rather than institutional. Our continuing hope is to offer a brand of radical and attractive Christianity to this missing generation. ■

Coming Up...

The next edition of *The Bible in TransMission* will be sent to you in February 1998. Among the mix of articles and reviews it will contain:

What Sort of Story, What Sort of Church?

Bible Society's Head of Theology and Public Policy, Colin Greene, examines some models of Church and their effectiveness in relating the gospel in the public domain.

Voices and Visions across the Cultural Gap

Professor Susan White of the Brite Divinity School, Texas (formerly of the Cambridge Theological Federation), explores some contemporary themes in preaching and its central place in forming a vision for the future of the Church's mission.

Facing the Challenge

Dafydd Andrew Jones, Secretary of the Board of Mission of the Presbyterian Church in Wales, explores how a Church which has experienced sharp decline, which is characterized by large buildings and small congregations, is developing a missionary strategy for rural and urban contexts.

Reviews...

Including *Scripture and Personality Type* by Leslie J Francis (Cassells), *Sacred Places, Pilgrim Paths* by Martin Robinson (HarperCollins), *Faith and Uncertainty* by John Habgood and *Making the Christian Bible* by John Barton (DLT).