

Charting a New Course for Your Church

Barrie Cooke, Senior Consultant at Bible Society, explains how consultancy can help

The Revd Barrie Cooke is a Methodist minister who has served urban and rural churches in Manchester, Yorkshire and the Midlands. He regularly lectures on church growth at home and overseas. His expertise in helping local churches to be missionary communities is not only born out of a knowledge of church growth principles, but also 32 years in pastoral work.



At Sea!

The Church has long been likened to a sailing boat. The Church's fathers in the first centuries of faith likened the Church to the ark, the ship of salvation. The logo of the ecumenical movement is a boat riding the world's seas. So to regard our church, whether it be St. Peter's or Ebenezer, under whatever flag we fly, as a sailing craft is not an inappropriate image.

In what shape do we find it? Is every member of the crew playing their part? And given the present climate, what is the morale of the sailors? Right now, our boat may be riding the waves without difficulty, but does everyone know where we are going? Or is, in fact, our crew totally bewildered because our boat is becalmed? Has the wind really failed us? The sky is filled with portents, but what do they mean? Some of us are indeed moving, and wish we weren't – at least not in this direction – because unless a different course of action is pursued, we are in danger of shipwreck! Is it the ship's officers who are the trouble? Or a motley crew? While some of us have been putting our case, others have

taken to the lifeboats!

Sailing enthusiasts will know how much further we can take the image. As one who can hardly tell the difference between a dinghy and dhow, I won't push my luck. I do know that every church has everything to gain from asking hard questions.

How do we assess our position? Do we know where we are going? Given a choice, by what criteria do we decide which is best, or what matters most? Are those who work the boat actually determining where it goes?

The Consultant's Role

Whether I might compare a church consultant to a ship's pilot, only sailors will know. But as there are times, so I am told, when there is wisdom in taking on board a pilot, so every church may benefit from another pair of eyes; another wayfarer, with a measure of experience, whose independence is respected by the crew and whose previous service fits him or her for the role. Let this be abundantly clear: the consultant comes on board not to steer the ship nor to give instructions. It is those, and only those, who have been with the ship, some of them born in it, who have the authority to order its life, plot its course, and determine its direction. The last thing a church needs is an "expert" offering simplistic answers to complex problems.

Has not the church employed the consultant because it is looking for advice? Maybe. But if the consultant yields to this pressure, those who seek his help are likely to say – "You

don't really understand where we are at."

So what is the consultant's role? It is the consultant's business to act as a counsellor, that is, to enable the church members to come to terms with their own situation, to interpret for themselves what is happening, to identify for themselves the critical issues, to show them what tools will help them in their task – but not to take up the tools and do the job for them.

A Process

Finding our facts, identifying key mission issues, developing a strategy is the beginning of a journey, not the end. The consultancy process is no magic panacea. No church should undertake it thinking it will be a "quick fix". This process of investigation and reflection is quite as important as the objectives the church seeks to reach. It is, for many, a new way learning, of discovering the mind of God. And where the congregation – not just the leaders – share the experience, there is the possibility of profound change.

It asks of everyone time, energy, and tough thinking. It encourages realism, yet provokes expectations. It holds the promise of a church turned inside out, a church with a common mind for mission. When a congregation sees how it can determine its own future it grows in self-esteem. When a congregation hears for itself what the Spirit is saying, it appreciates that, far from being a failure, it has a key part to play in God's purpose. In providing its consultancy service to the local church Bible Society seeks to empower the whole people of God to chart a new course.