



New Life in the Church

by Robert Warren

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He was previously Rector of St Thomas', Crookes, Sheffield, one of the largest and fastest-growing churches in England. He has written and lectured extensively on the subject of mission and evangelism. His recent books include Building Missionary Congregations (Church House Publishing, 1995), and Being Human, Being Church (Marshall Pickering, 1995).

“Five times in the history of Europe the Church has appeared to go to the dogs,” wrote G K Chesterton in *Everlasting Man*. “And each time,” he added, “it was the dog that died!” Which is why predictions of the imminent collapse of the faith and Church are greatly exaggerated. And why? Because there is an energy within the life of the Church that works towards renewal.

The challenge for each congregation is the same challenge that faces the Church as a whole. There are not really many options in a period of rapid and profound change; only death or renewal. We change or we die. Often, in fact, these two options become one. The prospect of the death (or just collapse) of all we hold dear, provokes us to a new-found faith in God, through which new life flows. The outcome is a renewed church – a church worth joining.

This being so, there are two important questions that need to be addressed.

Source of Life

The first question we need to address is “what is the source of this renewal in the life of the Church?” The obvious starting point is the grace of God; though this may immediately lead to misunderstanding. It is so easy to think that it is “all up

to God” and that there is nothing we can do. However, that is not how the kingdom of God works. The kingdom is essentially co-operative. God’s life comes when God and active faith are in company with each other. What the grace of God points us to, however, is the living tradition of the Christian faith; namely, prayer, sacraments, and, perhaps supremely, Scripture. As the Church engages with these, in the light of a new (and often testing) situation, new life comes.

One of the great signs of hope in the Church today is evident at just this point. There is a fresh engagement with Scripture as story. This is allowing Scripture to have a transformative effect on the life of the Church. Partly, this is the result of the global Church bringing light to Western Christianity. One example is the way that base communities in South America, Africa and Asia handle the Scriptures; sometimes in “dialogue sermons” which are created in the moment. This enables the whole congregation to participate in expounding/connecting the Scriptures with their context.

Partly, it is the result of skilled expositors opening up the Scriptures in a new way. This approach has been described as “a second naivety”. This approach recognizes that before the advent of critical scholarship there was a naive, often literalist, approach to the sacred texts.

With it went a clear understanding of Scripture as “the oracles of God”. Then came critical scholarship which helped us to understand the text, and its origins, much better. However, it seemed almost to rule out any faith engagement with God *through* the text. “Second Naivety” is an approach to Scripture which draws on and incorporates the insights of scholarship, as an aid to taking us into its ultimate value as “means of grace”, as the way in which God is encountered. In the introduction to his commentary on the Psalms (*The Message of the Psalms*, Augsburg, 1984), Walter Brueggemann says:

**What seems to be needed
(and is here attempted)
is a postcritical
interpretation that lets the
devotional and scholarly
traditions support, inform
and correct each other.**

Walter Wink's book, *Transforming Bible Studies*, and Peter Price's new book based on the Anglican lectionary, *Seeds of the Word* (Darton, Longman & Todd, 1996), are further valuable resources here.

Other evidence of new life in the Church can be seen in the way that prayer and spirituality are coming to the fore as a focus for all that the Christian faith is about; and in some creative new thinking about how worship can become the means to a living encounter with God.

Ways into Life

If the first question is “what is the source of this renewal in the life of the Church?”, the second question is “how can engagement with the tradition take place in a more widespread and consistent way?”. In other words, what can we do to facilitate this life-giving encounter with the grace of God through engagement with the riches of the Christian tradition?

Here we can point to what is actually taking place, rather than simply to what churches could or should be doing. This, in itself, is evidence of the new life within the Church. Essentially, the answer lies in a

process approach to evangelism and nurture. John Finney highlighted in his evangelism research (*Finding Faith Today*, Bible Society, 1993) that most people come to faith over a period of time. That happens as the Christian tradition and their experience of life interact, resulting in a series of choices that lead to recognizable commitment to following the Way of Christ. Long before he wrote that, there was a revival of the Catechumenate (literally “teaching”) in the Roman Catholic Church as a result of the Vatican II Council. It had resulted in the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults*, which is given separate treatment in John Finney's research. The Catechumenate Network has been working in this way – often rather hidden – for over twenty years, and has now produced a helpful Starter Pack (available from Canon Peter Ball, Whitton Edge, Ramsbury, Wiltshire, SN8 2PX). In the last five years, *Alpha* has burst upon the scene and spread well beyond the evangelical/charismatic tradition in which it is rooted.

Bible Society, in conjunction with Church House Publishing, has now made a major contribution to this whole process approach to evangelism, nurture, and the renewal of the faith of the whole church. *Emmaus – The Way of Faith* is pitched between the largely non-directive approach of the Catechumenate Network, and the more didactic approach of *Alpha*. It is a three-stage process: Contact, Nurture, and Growth. Obtaining the Introduction book (£3.95 from Bible Society) is probably the best way to discover just how it works.

Despite having the privilege of being one of the authors of *Emmaus*, I resist the temptation at this point to launch into a fuller explanation of its style, rites and stages. Instead, I turn to two important points that need to be faced by any church seeking to enable people to connect (or reconnect) with the living tradition of the Christian faith.

Choosing Life

When we ask how people can connect (or reconnect) with the

Christian tradition, there is always the danger of missed opportunities. One temptation is for churches to say “we know it already” or “nobody would be interested”. The fact is that, in today's rapidly changing world, anyone who desires to discover or retain a hold on the faith will need help in reworking it in the light of the changes that are taking place. No matter how much life there may be in our current church activities, we are on the road to decline and, potentially, death if we fail church members and enquirers at this point. In his book *The Pursuit of Excellence*, the management guru Tom Peters argues that, in this difficult, changing world, businesses that survive will be those which “stick to the knitting”. They focus on the core business they are about. The “knitting” of the Church is surely about “knitting” together communities of faith engaged in God's purposes in the world. If we fail to give people resources to fulfil that calling, we may well find the whole business of church dying on our hands.

The second temptation is to duck the challenge. This is not the same thing as missing the opportunity; rather, it is about refusing to face the way that the thorough work of initiation should shape the whole life of the church.

The (temptingly) easy thing to do would be to set up withdrawal classes for those who are interested in exploring the faith. Initiation then becomes a side-line to the main life of the church. If we do this, doubtless some good will come; some will find faith, or find faith coming alive, but *the church as a whole church will be untouched*. The truth, and the challenge, is to see the church as a community that is living out (and living by) its baptismal commitment. What we are “initiating” newcomers into is what “the rest of us” are seeking to do – walk in the Way of Christ. When that happens, the twin tasks of initiating newcomers, and of renewing the faith of those already part of the church, become fully integrated. That is why lay leadership, sponsors, the public rites “along the Way”, and much else besides, are so vital.



Fascinatingly, it is at this point that my work on “missionary congregations” connects with the work of initiation, for one of the surest ways to become a missionary congregation is by developing the work of initiation and integrating it into the whole life of the church. In this way, the church can become a community of the baptized, who come together to discover how to live out the faith into which we have all been baptized.

The Whole of Life

Our task today, as we seek to renew the life of the church *for the sake of the world*, is to take seriously each person’s journey of faith. We need to find ways of being alongside those who are currently exploring this new territory, and to enable the whole church to see itself as a community committed to living out this faith in the whole of life.

As the Baptism service in the *Alternative Service Book* puts it, we are not only to thank God that in his love he has called us to know him, led us to trust him, and bound our life with his; we are also to pray and work with enquirers so that they may “walk with us in the way of Christ and grow in the knowledge of (God’s) love”.

Now that would be a church worth joining!