

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE: CHALLENGES FOR THE CHURCHES

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THE FUTURE IS GOING TO BE DIFFERENT. That may seem an obvious thing to say but the churches need to hear it. An ageing leadership and institutions with a traditional culture mean that there will always be a pull to conservatism. One of the dangers for institutions that are declining numerically is retrenchment into defending and maintaining what they have and thus losing the dynamic purposes for which they were created.

If we need convincing that the future will be different, we need to take a look at how different the churches are now to what they used to be in the fairly recent past. First, the positives. In the past twenty years the various churches have closed 7,000 church buildings and opened 5,500 new ones. That demonstrates that they have been on the move, putting resources where people live. At the same time, the churches have learned to work together and trust each other more. That applies not only to the mainstream ecumenical movement but, more recently, to the growing house church movements, which are often taking a lead in courageous and united outreach. But it is not only the institutions that are working better together; it is also true of the individuals within them. Clericalism is disappearing, as clergy and laity learn together and work together on the wholeness of the Christian body. Many gifted lay people are finding more outlets for ministry and influence in the churches.

The Decade of Evangelism, while not bucking the social trends, has, I believe, changed the culture of many local churches from defensive institutions to baptised and witnessing communities. Many strands of traditional spirituality and worship, while not losing the foundations of word and sacrament, have had their patterns refreshed, so that those who are journeying in faith and those who are on a pilgrimage to faith find encouragement and enrichment in worship and prayer. All the churches have become more conscious of social and global witness. Sacrificial work for the alleviation of poverty, witness for human rights, campaigns against the arms trade and for the excluded have all picked up the biblical theme of a righteous God who is concerned for his one world.

The last generation has seen a combination of renewed worship, living for each other and with each other for others, and social righteousness spring up in a new community movement. We only have to mention L'Arche, Taizé and Iona for the truth of this to be apparent. In the history of the church, it has often been the prophetic communities that have ushered in renewal. It is possible to see that around us today.

A survey of changes across the churches also reveals some negatives. The work of Christian Research has indicated that, in the recent past, one-and-a-half million people have both joined and left the churches but a further one-and-a-half million members have died. Church planting has dropped in numbers, children and young people particularly have declined steeply in numbers in our churches, and knowledge of the faith and Bible reading is still low amongst church members. The signs are that these trends are accelerating.

So the future is going to be different and, if we take note of the accelerating speed of change, even the near future will reveal the changes that are upon us. Moreover, it is not just the churches that are changing but society as a whole. Today, that means the global society. Time was when British society had real control over its own destiny, and at the same time, wielded enormous power over the destiny of millions of people in other parts of the world. Now we are controlled by international factors especially in matters to do with the economy and employment, in communication and knowledge, in entertainment and leisure.

Many of these changes have an impact on our daily lives. The population is steadily ageing; there are more households, particularly of people living alone; there are fewer marriages so that parenting, step-parenting and grandparenting are becoming subjects of learning when once they were thought to be second nature. Work patterns are changing: more women are working, more people are in part-time jobs, a life of one career is becoming a rarity. Partly because of this, learning is no longer confined to the young but life-long learning is now a necessity for us all. The Internet is transforming access to knowledge and building bridges across cultures. Childhood is becoming shorter and, while choices are opening up for some, they are narrowing catastrophically for others.

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The social commentary Britain Towards 2010 has highlighted three changes that are particularly relevant to the life of the churches:

- There is a growing gap between institutions and people
- Organised social culture is giving way to network culture
- Rational thinking is threatened by polysensorial experience.

What, then, should be the response of the churches to this challenge of change?

First, I believe, we must continue to give attention to worship and prayer. There is no doubt that well-planned, thoughtful and professionally presented worship is our major tool of mission. Planning does not mean stagnation but will leave scope for spontaneous participation. It does mean that there is no room for treating what happens at lectern, pulpit and altar in a cavalier fashion. There are now plenty of aids to getting this right but it takes time and calls for the collaboration of all those who take a leading role. Worship at its best will stimulate private and informal prayer in other settings. Local churches should give a high priority to the development of lay spirituality. This means that all that is planned in the life of the church will depend utterly on the grace of God. He is the God of change and reveals in his creation that growth of any kind means change.

Then, we must cultivate leadership styles that are essentially collaborative. We clergy need to take each other seriously as partners and lay people as fellow ministers. The creation of a missionary community should be the aim of all local congregations. This requires a cultural change in our institutional life so that hierarchies give way to teams. It is clear that we have much to relearn if the church is once again to become a learning community, which encourages the learning process throughout life and becomes an anticipation of heaven. Mid-week programmes, adopting the strengths of Alpha and Emmaus, which are socially relaxed, clear, demanding and with real content, work in many local churches. Smaller churches can become less isolated by taking advantage of the gifts of neighbouring churches and using new technologies to encourage distance learning.

Mission will increasingly take a world-view, recognising that what happens across the world has immediate effects in our locality and vice versa. Other cultures, some on our doorstep, have much to offer in understanding the purposes of a global God. While the encouragement of personal discipleship remains crucial, no individual can be isolated from what is happening around him. For our faith to have integrity, it must make a difference in the actual environment in which we live.

Nowhere is this more true than in the context of the family. Here Christian witness to steadfastness, loyalty, forgiveness and joy will be crucial in the next decade. The churches will need to keep their nerve and sometimes be ready to be counter-cultural, misunderstood and unpopular. That is a gospel risk that comes to us directly from Jesus.

The great themes of the next generation demand a reinterpretation of the Christian world-view. Concern for the environment leads to teaching about creation. Globalisation stretches our understanding of redemption and salvation. Questions about personal morality will show us new ways of discipleship. A movement away from individualism to collectivism will offer opportunities to rethink what we mean by community and church. Science, especially medical and genetic science, will require that our understanding of nature and sovereignty needs new interpretation and application. Those people who find themselves marginalised and excluded by change, or unable to cope with it, will be the ones we shall search out, following the pastoral patterns of Jesus. The way we model collaboration, and lay aside our infighting, will become a vehicle of a gospel of reconciliation.

If all this seems an overwhelming agenda, we can take comfort in two facts. First, the churches have proved themselves to be capable of evolutionary change throughout their history. Secondly, we can look forward to change without abandoning our foundations. God, our Father, is the creator of all things in every age. Christ, our reconciler, is the great bridge builder from one generation and one culture to another.

The Holy Spirit is our companion on our pilgrimage. 'All the time the Lord went before them, by day a pillar of cloud to guide them on their journey, by night a pillar of fire to give them light, so that they could travel night and day.' ■