



A RAPID RESPONSE TO “COMMUNITY OF THE CROSS”

The introduction to Martin’s article grabbed my attention. For Martin begins his article with a narration of his first days in ministry moving into a council estate in the 1970s. That story was particularly fascinating for me, as I grew up in the 70s and 80s on various council estates. My experience is one I could correlate with much of Martin’s story, but with a child and teenager’s perspectives.

The issues of community spaces owned by local authorities and where real community lay, is something I remember vividly. Church as far as I remember was relegated to Christmas services with school carol concerts and sometimes services that my local cub scouts had to attend.

There are some other things I noticed that might go alongside Martin’s account. For me, if there was community, it lay in schools, sports clubs, working men’s clubs, pubs, and most of all in the rise of the

indoor shopping centre. The place for community increasingly became the weekend and then evening travel to shopping centres. Much of the landscape of my childhood can be measured against the changes in shopping opportunities. Also most significantly was the move to sell council homes to tenants. I watched as my generation of kids saw their parents enter into home ownership, and climb into middle class suburbia with those council estates. And the whole time, the church was rather absent from any experience of community for me. I think the landscape of many council estates has changed dramatically with community transferring into the shopping centre and housing market.

Martin raises his story, to ask why then was the church so disconnected from community life, when it had previously been so connected? For indeed previously church sat at the centre of community life in the UK.

Martin does not offer a detailed diagnosis for that decline, and himself notes in passing that the churches with an ongoing community connection in the 1950s were those from a liberal tradition, that fitted the ongoing affairs of secular post war society in the UK.

I think we can trace some other factors in that loss of connection of church from community, that then helps with the approach Martin proposes for re-connection.

I suggest that from people like Dominic Erdozain^[1], and David Bebbington^[2], we can see that the central place of churches collapsed for a few key reasons. One was the success of Evangelical churches with community education and health care and then the transfer of this mission to the state. Martin notes the previous heroes of the Evangelical church as popular motivators for new missional activities today.

Then there is the relativizing of the church into a place providing leisure activities. Anglican churches particularly, concerned with the rapid fall in attendance at the end of World War II, opened their halls and public spaces for leisure activities. In an attempt to have people in the community remain in contact with churches, church became a space for Judo, Badminton, jumble sales, yoga and 5 a side football. If people suspected church had little to do with everyday life, it signed its own death warrant by allowing itself to exist as a space for the extension of leisure and sport activities. In short Church was co-opted by the growth in community through leisure spaces, instead of remaining the church, whilst sport was sport.

Martin provoked me to think how today, despite the changes in makeup of those council estate communities, it is immigrant Evangelical churches that continue with grass roots missions. David Martin has noted how immigrant Evangelical and Pentecostal churches are the places that combine worship and community, with helping immigrants gain access to society, for education, language and work. He also notes that once Western society has been successfully accessed, those immigrants often abandon their practice of faith, no longer needing it.^[3]

Personally I see this with a much younger half brother I have, whose mother is from Philippines. The Evangelical church that he has become part of offer strong marriage values (he got a girl pregnant outside of married before becoming a Christian), language learning and access to local services. I asked

him and he confirmed that members of his community once ‘successful’ in terms of work and relationships, often move away from church.

So I offer those observations to bring Martin’s account into contact with some related contextual forces, and for the most important point Martin makes. He highlights how capitalism has developed into the processes and culture of commodification.

I think that process, is the most significant issue for the change in all communities in the UK, not just council estates. It presents the single biggest challenge to real mission by the church and connection to all local communities.

Desperate council sink hole council estates still exist but most of the UK has been commodified, with young people trained to do what their parents do in their spare time: shop. Community has become the domain of the market for leisure experiences, with people more isolated from each other than ever.

Is the role of church to enter those few poor estates and help people to successfully access consumer society? Or is to radically rethink mission for the isolating pathologies of commodification in our society? I do not think we have yet begun to imagine or understand what that would look like.

And how do we engage in a mission within commodified society, when most Christians seem to have moved into the market for their main purpose in life. I have been a Christian since I found faith aged seventeen, and one of my most persistent ongoing experiences with Christian friends, who are successful in terms of work and market access, is their leaving church completely. They often see no relevance for church to their lifestyle aspirations and struggles within consumer society to make a life. What is the nature of mission when Christian faith has been commodified into meeting God on the Golf course or in Starbucks with your cappuccino?

Martin ends his piece with a brief suggestion as to how the Eucharist might form a missional response to these problems. Through the Eucharist the church re-enacts and lives a different story to that of commodification. This is how I read Martin, at least, and I think it is the most promising avenue for missional engagement.

So taking account of Martin’s narratives, and if commodification is the missional context we find ourselves in, what does it mean to live within God’s economy missionally?

I would suggest that while the Eucharist is the beginning of a motif and imaginary, it will need some legs to take shape in mission. How do we retell and relive, ‘the Christ event’ (to use a phrase from Oliver O’Donovan#): the advent, passion, ascension and parousia of Jesus. How does this set our imagination and how we live, instead of the telos and eschatology of consumer dreams, of living in a nice place, in a great house, and more?

Perhaps Jeremiah 29 gives us a clue for how that might take shape. A worshipping community, where

the imagination for Christian faith is not how God might provide me with the consumer dream, and its key domains of concern: jobs, house and relationships. But it is a community where through worship we literally order those domains, work, homes and relationships for the welfare of the places we live in.

That might be to live truly missionally and counter culturally to the social imaginaries of commodification. It might help us avoid repeating an approach to mission that turns others into successful consumers, and it might address the new needs of a society increasingly adrift in commodified isolation.

When I was seventeen it was a local church that stepped into my family to offer help. My Father has left us, and my Mother had a one year old son, and my other brother was fifteen. It was into that nightmare of alcoholic abuse, and threatened homelessness, that my local Baptist church entered.

One of the first prayers someone prayed over me was Jeremiah 29, and I remember being amazed at the idea that there was a God who had a better life for me. But infused in that prayer and worship experience was the idea that that life He would give me was to be given back to him for others. I guess I live with the shape of that worship experience from that local church today.

1. Dominic Erdozain. *The Problem of Pleasure: Sport, Recreation and the Crisis of Victorian Religion* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2010). ¹
2. David Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* New ed. (London: Routledge, 1988). ¹
3. David Martin, *Pentecostalism: The World Their Parish* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002). ¹



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