



ON NOT KNOWING THE END AT THE BEGINNING



The Fresh Expressions initiative began as a result of the publication of the Church of England report 'Mission-Shaped Church'^[1]. It developed as a partnership between the Church of England and the British Methodist Church, and now includes the United Reformed Church, the Congregational Federation, the Church of Scotland and the Salvation Army. This work, and its training materials has been taken up in a variety of parts of the world, including Australia, Barbados, Canada, Germany, New Zealand, South Africa and the USA.

A fresh expression of church is defined as 'a form of church for our changing culture established

primarily for the benefit of people who are not yet members of any church. It will come into being through principles of listening, service, incarnational mission and making disciples. It will have the potential to become a mature expression of church shaped by the gospel and the enduring marks of the church and for its cultural context.' [2]

No blueprint

The emphasis on 'listening' (discernment) and 'incarnational mission' (with particular emphasis on the specific local context) means that a key element of the praxis for planting fresh expressions of church, as developed in the UK, has been the recognition that the planting pioneer or team will not know the shape, model or cultural form of the fresh expression when they start out on the process of planting.

This contrasts with earlier approaches to church planting, which operated on more of a blueprint or architect's drawing model, where the plan was drawn up, the team formed, the resources gathered and only then the work begun. Often this was also a franchise model whereby a standard model of church was regarded as suitable everywhere, based on a particular denomination or tradition's history, whether recently established or centuries old. Success would be determined in part by the resemblance of the final project to the initial design. Did it look like church to those who commissioned the plant, was often more important than whether it was an effective and authentic church for those it was trying to reach.

Some models of fresh expression of church do have a franchise element. Messy Church, for example, has spread round the world. But the point is not that every fresh expression should be unique, but that it should be appropriate to context. In a culture full of brands and franchises it would be surprising if this were not also a component of contextual church planting. However, in a recent study of the Church of England's dioceses of Canterbury and Liverpool there were 19 different models of fresh expression among the seventy or so examples in each of these very different dioceses. [3]

A discernment led process

Best practice, which has developed as we have reflected on the hundreds of fresh expressions which have been planted since 2004 [4], is a discernment led process, following a sequence of listening, serving, forming community, making disciples and only at the end letting the public form of the fresh expression emerge. [5]

Contextual planting

This turn to contextual planting has developed through a number of stages of thinking. The first was the recognition that there is no culture free Christianity: That the missionary movement of recent centuries had not taken 'proper' church to other cultures, but had often imposed its own culture as the norm for others. Preparation for cross cultural mission then became the norm for those called overseas. We sent them to missionary college so that they could learn how they might engage with their new context. It

took the missionary insight of Lesslie Newbigin, combined with the recognition that culture at home had changed substantially, before it struck home that cross cultural mission might be needed to reach across the street rather than across the seas. In practice, because there is no culture free Christianity, all churches contextualise, but only some know that is what they are doing and not all do it well! The Lausanne consultation 'Contextualisation Revisited' called for a move 'From contextualization as merely a strategy for cross cultural mission' to 'Contextualization as a necessary and conscious practise of all churches in mission within their own cultures.'^[6]

Contemporary cultural change is not from one stable form to another. Cultures are never static, but the accelerated speed of change, the complexity of a joined up multicultural world and the fluidity of the resulting cultures make our times profoundly unpredictable. We live in a time of discontinuous change. To quote Zygmunt Bauman '... the behaviour of complex systems with a number of mutually independent variables is and will forever remain *unpredictable*. Not just unpredictable to *us*, because of ignorance, negligence or dim-headedness, but by their very nature. Because the world we inhabit is as complex a system as can be imagined, *its future is a great unknown*, and it is bound to remain unknown whatever we do. The future is unpredictable because it is, purely and simply, *undetermined*.'^[7] Theologically, of course, this is not the case. Christ has secured the future. We live towards that future which he has already secured, through his incarnation, death and resurrection. As we shall see, that future is to shape the present. But in the praxis of mission we live at a time when previous experience, and previous models as keys to reaching a culture, are very fallible guides for the future.

Although there is a dominant Western culture, which should be taken seriously, the key to planting a fresh expression of church is the local context. What forces shape a locality, whether neighbourhood or network or a combination of the two? Mission and disciple-making becomes a process of contextualisation or inculturation, involving the reading of a local culture. The complexity of contemporary society makes it even more important to recognise the distinctiveness of each local context. It also makes the cloning of models, which work elsewhere, the least appropriate contemporary church planting strategy. One size cannot fit all.

Rooted in a living tradition

But neither can the local context, or missional expedience, be the sole factors shaping a fresh expression of church. I write as an Anglican by conviction, so it is a matter of central concern to me to be able to establish how a local church can be a recognisable expression of the universal church. The church in each era and culture is the latest expression of a living tradition. Rootedness in that living tradition is one of the vital keys for local discernment about the shape of the church. There are key praxis questions about continuity and discontinuity with the past when discerning the appropriate local form of the church. Jurgen Moltmann identified this creative tension when he wrote 'Where the retrospective bond with the apostles is concerned, the historical church will ask about continuity, and strive for continuity. But where the future its apostolate serves is concerned it will be open to leap forward to what is new and surprising.'^[8]

It is here, at the interconnection between living tradition and contemporary context, that I find some ancient theology helpful. It is not a matter of practitioners learning ancient or new doctrinal theory and then trying to put it into practice, but of theological insight opening the way to missional practice, because it enables missional imagination. Puzzled practitioners, who know that existing ways are no longer fruitful or appropriate, can turn to the living tradition for the insight they need. The purpose is not to find ancient practice to romanticise and clone, but to be guided by the tradition to new windows on current contexts.

Two hands better than one

In the second century the church Father Irenaeus called the Son and the Spirit ‘the two hands of God’.^[9] Church planting, which is both to be anchored in the Christian tradition and contextual, needs to be a two handed process! Both Christology (the doctrine of Christ) and Pneumatology (the doctrine of the Holy Spirit) need to be brought to bear. The Orthodox theologian, Metropolitan John Zizoulou wrote that ‘Christ in-stitutes (the Church) and the Spirit con-stitutes.’ ‘The “in-stitution” is something presented to us, more or less a fait-accompli.... The “con-stitution” is something that involves us in its very being, something that we accept freely because we take part in its very emergence.’^[10] In other words the person and work of Christ is the given of the gospel. Any attempt at translation or embodiment of the gospel has to be faithful to that which is given. The church is only ‘the body of Christ’ (1Cor. 12), if it is the Christ of the Scriptures (1Cor. 15) and creeds, who is being embodied. The body of Christ is called to bear the image of the biblical Christ. But translatability is also of the essence of the gospel. ‘Christianity is culturally infinitely translatable.’^[11] The early church quickly dispensed with the culture and language of its founder and opened up other languages and cultures. Our Gospels are missionary documents in which the original words of Jesus have been translated into Greek, as the primary first century language of mission. The translation was not of words alone but from one culture to many. The Holy Spirit was and is the chief translator and interpreter. The Spirit works ‘with’ the church to enable it to take Christ-like shape, appropriate to its context.

We shall consider each hand in turn.

The Spirit of God

It has become matter of fact to recognise the central role of the Holy Spirit in mission. But there is a danger that this is little more than an agreed theory which leads to little change in praxis. Newbigin warned that ‘It may seem that in stressing the role of the Holy Spirit in the mission of the Church I am simply repeating what everyone knows. And yet I have become convinced that even when this belief is present and vivid, there are factors in the structures and traditions of our work, which can prevent the belief from becoming effective.’^[12]

There have been two main recent emphases on the role of the Spirit in mission. Both place discernment in context at the heart of the missionary task.

The Spirit as missionary leader

The first concerns the role of the Spirit as the active leader of the Church's mission. John V Taylor's classic book 'The Go-Between God' opens with these words:

The chief actor in the historic mission of the Christian church is the Holy Spirit. He is the director of the whole enterprise. The mission consists of the things that he is doing in the world. In a special way it consists of the light that he is focussing upon Jesus Christ.^[13]

The Spirit is identified as the director of mission, not from head office, but ahead of the church on and beyond each front line. If this is the case then obedient faith, setting out to follow wherever the Spirit leads, without knowing the outcome at the beginning, is normal for Christian mission. "The shape of empowered mission is not arrived at ideologically, or even pragmatically. In mission we ask not just "Is this action good and necessary?" We also ask, "Where is God leading? Is this God's undertaking?" ... Spirit leadership is central.'^[14] I am convinced that the power of the Spirit is fundamentally power for witness beyond our comfort zones and familiar practices. In Acts 1:8 the move from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth conveys the essence of the missionary gift, rather than being incidental to it. In Luke Timothy Johnson's recent study of Luke/Acts 'Prophetic Jesus, Prophetic Church' he identifies openness to the Spirit as the contemporary equivalent of the itinerant ministry of Jesus and then of the apostles. "The narrative of Acts suggests that a community truly led by the Spirit will be led in new and surprising directions.'^[15] A careful reading of Acts, reveals a church continually surprised by the Spirit. Much which we now take for granted was a surprise to the church at the time. Why should it be different for us? The church takes shape by following the missionary Spirit. Bevans & Schroeder summarised their study of Acts by affirming that, "The church is "missionary by its very nature" and it *becomes* missionary by attending to each and every context in which it finds itself.'^[16] Following the missionary Spirit involves us in more than spotting opportunities which have been prepared for us, it involves the possibility of significant change, as the story of Peter and Cornelius illustrates. 'God is already ahead of all evangelism, carrying on his mission to the world. More often than not respectful discernment will demand drastic changes of heart and mind, as for Peter with his own traditions.'^[17] One pioneer minister, who led his people out of their church building to plant into the local tower block, described how they were all 'evangelized by the process.'

A foretaste of the future

The second insight concerns the eschatological nature of the Spirit's work. The Holy Spirit is and brings the anticipation of the future Christ has already secured. 'The Spirit is 'The *certain evidence* that that future had dawned, and the *absolute guarantee*' of its final consummation.'^[18] In biblical language the Spirit is first fruits, foretaste, down payment and guarantee of the final harvest. According to Newbigin:

...the Church in each place is to be the sign, instrument and foretaste of the reign of God present in Christ for that place: a sign, planted in the midst of the present realities of the place but pointing beyond them to the future which God has promised; an instrument available for God's use in the doing of his will for that place; a foretaste - manifesting and enjoying already, in the midst of the messianic tribulations, a genuine foretaste of the peace and joy of God's reign.[\[19\]](#)

This has two implications for praxis. First, the key to planting contextual church is not just a matter of establishing relevance but of local prophetic foretaste of the future which Christ has secured, as it can be demonstrated in that time and place. In other words contextual churches are to be sources of hope, pointing to a future in which people can invest their lives.

Second, as Alan Roxburgh emphasizes[\[20\]](#), the key to missional church lies in the presence of the Holy Spirit. Missional imagination is possible because of the presence of the Spirit, even when such imagination seems little in evidence. This was promised from the beginning. The dreams, visions and prophecies, foretold by Joel and poured out at Pentecost are the gifts which equip missional leaders to plant churches which are provisional foretastes of the future. These gifts take form with greater diversity than some Charismatic circles allow, but they give substance to the promise of missional imagination. Good leadership cultivates an environment where that imagination can emerge. There is clear evidence that the vision for fresh expressions has released large numbers of new missional leaders in the Church of England and the Methodist Church. If empowerment for witness beyond one's comfort zone is of the essence of the Pentecostal gift, then missional imagination is the key to discernment.

The Son of God

It is obvious how the Spirit is central to missional praxis. But how does Christology help us? The incarnation of Christ is unique. The once for all event, when the word became flesh, is the basis for our salvation, But 'The event defines how it is to be embodied and thus communicated.'[\[21\]](#) The pattern of God's unique, once for all, saving act, also provides the pattern for mission. Paul's statement, in 1 Corinthians 9, is based in the incarnation.

For though I am free with respect to all, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I might win more of them. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though I myself am not under the law) so that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law) so that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, so that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel'

He engaged each culture from within, to the full extent possible, while remaining faithful to Christ. In summary he says 'Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.' (1 Cor. 11:1) To proclaim the

cross faithfully, he imitated the incarnation.

Mission involves moving out of oneself and one's accustomed terrain, and taking the risk of entering another world. It means living on someone else's terms, as the Gospel itself is about God living on someone else's terms, the Word becoming flesh, divinity being expressed in terms of humanity. And the transmission of the Gospel requires a process analogous, however distantly, to that great act on which the Christian faith depends.^[22]

The more we pay attention to a local context^[23] the more necessary an incarnational approach becomes. 'Christian faith is embodied faith; Christ takes flesh among those who respond to him in faith. But there is no generalized humanity; incarnation has always to be culture specific.'^[24]

The body of Christ

The fundamental meaning of the church as 'the body of Christ': that is, Christ taking flesh in each context, is often overlooked because of the other applications of the metaphor, concerning the role and gifting of each member of the church, and the quality of relationships within it. But the essence is that Christ takes appropriate shape within each culture and context, while remaining recognisably the Christ of the gospels. This is made most explicit in the letter to the Ephesians where the church is introduced as 'his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all' (Eph. 1:23). Christ fills (or completes) each place by taking appropriate shape in a community of its followers. In this community there is reconciliation with God and across cultural divides. A new humanity has been created. It is the people of the new heaven and the new earth, living in advance of that reality. (Eph. 2) Through it God demonstrates his manifold wisdom to the forces which shape the present age. (Eph. 3) This new humanity is the body of Christ. (Eph. 4)

This makes mission a voyage of Christological discovery as we see Christ 'take shape' in contexts with which we are unfamiliar. The Lausanne Haslev consultation saw 'Practicing contextualisation as a way of discovering the fullness of the gospel through a living, growing encounter between the gospel, proclaimed and lived; the Bible and the personal, social, political, economic, religious worlds in which we live.'^[25] Further riches of Christ are revealed through mission. Guder says 'They were not expanding the gospel as they followed the missional mandate of our Lord across all the safe boundaries of their world. The gospel was expanding them. It still does.'^[26]

Christ locally expressed

This has substantial implications for the culture of the local church, if it is to be in any sense missional or incarnational. To quote Newbigin:

This will mean that the character of the local church will not be determined primarily by the

character, tastes, dispositions, etc., of its members, but by those of the secular society in which and for which it lives – seen in the light of God’s redemptive purpose revealed in Jesus Christ for all men.[27]

Christology shapes ecclesiology in praxis not just in doctrinal theory.

In the introduction to ‘Mission-Shaped Church’ Rowan Williams defined church as an event. It is ‘what happens when people encounter the Risen Jesus and commit themselves to sustaining and deepening that encounter in their encounter with each other.’ This provides ‘plenty of theological room for diversity of rhythm and style’ and we would add, of context. But the Archbishop added one condition, ‘so long as we have ways of identifying the same living Christ at the heart of every expression of Christian life in common.’[28] Each contextual church is a local expression of the body of the same Christ. How then can we be sure that the context does not distort the way Christ is locally expressed?

Connected and rooted

First we need to note that every context will distort to one degree or another. That is why each local church has to be related to other local churches and to the universal church. Walls says ‘None of us can reach Christ’s completeness on our own. We need each other’s vision to correct, enlarge and focus our own; only together are we complete in Christ.’[29] Isolated contextual churches create a distorted form of corporate Christian life. Solitary confinement is a form of cruelty, not a condition for local flourishing.

Rootedness in Christ provides our immune system against such distortion. Practitioners need to immerse themselves in the Gospels to learn how Jesus engaged with Israel in his day. ‘As Jesus to Israel so the Church to the world.’[30] Dallas Willard’s definition of discipleship as ‘being with Jesus in order to learn from him how he would live my life’[31] has direct application to church planting and fresh expressions of Church. This involves a lot more than asking ‘What would Jesus do?’ The Gospels are not source books for bright missional ideas. Before we ask for wisdom about a context we need to see it through the eyes of Christ. The gift of the incarnation, revealed for us in Scripture is the gift of being able to see (imperfectly) as God sees, the gift of viewing all of life from the perspective of his Son. ‘In order to obtain a God’s eye view ... we merely need to hold true to the narratives which identify Jesus and organise the rest of our beliefs accordingly.’[32] It is the long term, disciplined praxis of immersing ourselves in the narratives about Jesus, which train our eyes to read a context Christologically and act incarnationally. This is not a matter of Jesus becoming increasingly familiar, but of our allowing him to continually surprise us. Archbishop Stuart Blanche spent years studying the Gospel of Mark day by day. He told our congregation in York ‘Everytime I think I have grasped him, I discover something else which astounds me.’ Training to follow the surprising and unexpected leading of the Spirit comes through being continually surprised by the Christ of the Gospels and the remainder of the New Testament.

Christ in Scripture provides the unchangeable foundation for all mission. Of particular significance is Christ's praxis of mission, and the way in which that is contextualised into Gentile cultures in the New Testament church. Faithfulness to the gospel involves more than faithfulness to our understanding of the message, it involves a contextual application of the method.

Double handed mission

The two hands belong to one body. There is coordination between them. There can be no setting the Spirit against the Son or vice versa. In Revelation 2 it is Christ in all his glory who says 'Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches.' According to David Ford this cry of Jesus 'constitutes the church as a school of the wisdom of Christ, alert to his words and his own embodiment of them.'^[33] The Spirit points to the Son and the Son to the Spirit. If rootedness in Christ is our immune system, then our capacity to identify the leading of the Spirit, provides our missionary flexibility.

Perhaps the greatest weakness in contemporary church planting is that we find it much easier to plant something culturally appropriate than something prophetic. We have always known how to recreate the church of the past. We are learning how to plant church which is relatively contemporary, though often too comfortable. What our world needs is church which is prophetic, in the sense that it offers an imperfect foretaste of a believable future, secured by Christ. This would be a church where repentance was primarily turning from the inadequate and sinful to something better, something believable, something which sustains hope in community. If we are to plant such churches we must pay close attention to context, we must accept that we will probably not know the end at the beginning, and above all we will have to be two handed.

[1] Mission-Shaped Church Working Group, Church of England's Mission and Public Affairs Council, *Mission-Shaped Church*, 2nd ed. (London: Church House, 2009).

[2] <http://www.freshexpressions.org.uk/about/whatis> (Last Accessed 17.5.13).

[3] George Lings, http://www.churcharmy.org.uk/ms/sc/reimaginechurch/sfc_database.aspx (Last accessed 17.5.13)

[4] Fresh Expressions website: 200+ stories. <http://www.freshexpressions.org.uk/stories> (Last accessed 17.5.13)

[5] See David Goodhew, Andrew Roberts and Michael Volland, *fresh!: An Introduction to Fresh Expressions of Church and Pioneer Ministry*, (Norwich: SCM, 2012) 107ff and Graham Cray, "Communities of the Kingdom" in Graham Cray, Aaron Kennedy and Ian Mobsby eds., *Fresh*

Expressions of Church and the Kingdom of God, (Canterbury Press, 2012) 19-26.

[6] The Lausanne Committee for World Evangelisation and The Institute for the Study of Islam and Christianity. *Gospel Contextualisation Revisited*.

<http://www.lausanne.org/en/documents/all/haslev-1997/318-gospel-contextualisation-revisited.html>
(Accessed 16th May 2013).

[7] Zygmunt Bauman, *44 Letters from the Liquid Modern World*, (Polity 2010) 107.

[8] Jurgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*, (SCM 1977) 360.

[9] Irenaeus 'Against Heresies,' in Stanley M. Burgess, *The Holy Spirit: Ancient Christian Traditions*, (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 1984), 59-61

[10] John Zizoulos, *Being as Communion*, (New York: SVS Press, 1985) 130.

[11] Andrew Walls, *The Cross-Cultural Process Christian History*, (T&T Clark, 2002) 29.

[12] Lesslie Newbigin, *Trinitarian Doctrine for Today's Mission*, (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1998) 74.

[13] John V. Taylor, *The Go-Between God: The Holy Spirit and the Christian Mission*, (London: SCM Press, 1972), 3.

[14] Clark H. Pinnock, *Flame of Love: a Theology of the Holy Spirit* (IVP 1996), 145.

[15] Luke T. Johnson, *Prophetic Jesus Prophetic Church*, (Eerdmans 2011)

[16] Stephen B. Bevans and Roger Schroeder, *Constants in Context: a Theology of Mission Today*, (Orbis 2004), 2.

[17] David F. Ford and Daniel W. Hardy, *Praising and Knowing God*, (Westminster 1985) 151.

[18] Gordon D. Fee, *God's Empowering Presence: the Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul*, (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1994) 806.

[19] Lesslie Newbigin, *A Local Church Truly United*, (1976),

<http://www.wcc-coe.org/wcc/who/crete-03-e.html> (Last accessed 17.5.13).

[20] Alan Roxburgh and Fred Romanuk, *The Missional Leader*, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006) 5, 9.

[21] Darell Guder, *The Incarnation and the Church's Witness* (Wipf & Stock 2004) 15.

- [22] Andrew Walls, "Christian Scholarship and the Demographic Transformation of the Church," in *Theological Literacy for the 21st Century*, eds. Rodney L. Peterson & Nancy M. Rourke (Eerdmans 2002) 170f.
- [23] See Michael Moynagh, *Church for Every Context*, (SCM 2012)
- [24] Andrew Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, (T&T Clark 1996) 47.
- [25] Lausanne Committee, *Gospel Contextualisation*, *ibid.*
- [26] Darell Guder, *The Incarnation and the Church's Witness*, (Wipf & Stock 2004) 38.
- [27] Lesslie Newbigin, *ibid.*
- [28] Rowan Williams "Introduction" in *Mission-Shaped Church* (Church House, 2004) v.
- [29] Andrew Walls, *The Cross-Cultural Process Christian History*, (T&T Clark 2002) 79.
- [30] NT Wright, in online audio lecture "God's future for the world has arrived in the person of Jesus." Quoted by Andrew Perriman <http://www.opensourcetheology.net/ntwright> (Last accessed 17.5.13)
- [31] Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy*, Fount 1998, 283.
- [32] Bruce D. Marshall, *Trinity and Truth*, (Cambridge University Press 2000) 169.
- [33] David F. Ford, *Christian Wisdom: Desiring God and Learning in Love,* (Cambridge University Press, 2007) 188.



Bishop Graham Cray

Graham Cray has been the Archbishops' Missioner and Leader of the Fresh Expressions Team since 2009. He is married to Jackie and they have two daughters, Catherine and Sarah.

His special concerns are the re-evangelization of the UK, the engagement of the Gospel with contemporary culture, youth ministry and the theology of renewal for mission. He chaired the working party which wrote the Mission Shaped Church report on church planting and fresh expressions of church.

