

Church Times **April 7 2006**

New-style churches defended
By Pat Ashworth

NEW FORMS of church do have an authentic theology, says a new report by the Revd Ian Mobsby, an associate of the Ekklesia think tank.

The C of E report *Mission-Shaped Church*, in 2004 provoked discussion about Anglican identity and the meaning of being Anglican in practice in new forms and styles of church. Critics of the report have included Professor John Hull from the Queen's Foundation, Birmingham, who suggested that it was imperialistic and insensitive to the poor.

Mr Mobsby's study draws on three years' research into "emerging and fresh expressions of church". He dismisses charges of theological weakness in the strategy, and describes many forms of new church as "richly earthed in forms of authentic theology regarding what it means to be church and what it means to do mission in the 21st century".

His findings pointed to "a re-discovery of a vision of unity in diversity, of collaboration between tradition and new experiment", Mr Mobsby said. Emerging forms of church often appeared to hold "a distinctly Trinitarian, mystical, and sacramental understanding of 'church'".

He was excited to conclude that much of the vision of the "emerging Church" resonated with the writings of the 16th-century divine Richard Hooker.

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The Tablet
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Gospel for Generation X

With some 100,000 Mass-goers leaving the Catholic Church in the past three years, our series looking at new ways of reaching out continues this week with a joint movement by the Anglican and Methodist Churches that has brought more than 30,000 back to the fold

The thinking behind Fresh Expressions, launched officially in September 2004, is "to find new ways of being a church to fit a changing culture". The Archbishop of Canterbury, his bishops and the General Synod are encouraging parishes to break out of their traditional buildings and services and meet people "where they are".

Unlike other attempts to revive the ailing established Church or Methodism in the last decade, this one is gathering its own momentum with 450 member congregations now registered and listed in the Fresh Expressions directory. The Church of England's literature dares to describe it as "springtime in the Church" and proclaims the Holy Spirit is at work.

Some of the ideas are extraordinary. In Cornwall there is a Methodist "prayer and a pasty" service; in Walsall an Asian congregation is praying on people's doorsteps between 6 a.m. and 7 a.m. for Lent; there is a children's Messy Church in Portsmouth; and Legacy Xs is a skateboard park church in Benfleet, Essex, for teenagers.

Fresh Expressions seems to be reaching people who have fallen away from the Church and is gradually penetrating the unchurched generation that is uncomfortable with the buildings, rituals and music associated with a Sunday morning service.

"A substantial part of the population are two or three generations away from the Christian faith and they don't know the story or the language," said the Revd Steve Croft, one of the Fresh Expressions team. "The Church has to learn how to begin again for this generation. Our motive is not to get people back into church. It is to find a new way of being church for them."

The Church of England, like other denominations, has been losing Sunday worshippers since the 1950s. In 1994 the usual Sunday attendance was 1,081,000 and in 2004 (the last time statistics were collected) it had dropped to 903,000.

The Methodist Church is declining at a rate of about 8 per cent a year, according to the Revd Pete Pillinger, who represents his Church on the Fresh Expressions team. "We are haemorrhaging young people, with 15 per cent of the under-thirties leaving each year," he said. "We had a million members in the 1930s and now we are down to 300,000."

Through the Anglican Methodist Covenant



- an agreement that the two denominations work together where possible - there is a combined effort to make Fresh Expressions work. Most of the money comes from the Anglican Lambeth Partners (a group established when Robert Runcie was Archbishop of Canterbury), which supports the Archbishop in his work. The partners have promised £2 million to fund a team of a dozen leaders and their resources for five years. The Methodist Church has helped by appointing Pete Pillinger as full-time officer and meeting half the costs of training DVDs for parishes.

The Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Rowan Williams, wants every Church Council to take action and envisages a "mixed economy" church with the traditional and the new working alongside each other. A good example of this is St Matthew's, Westminster - a traditional Anglo-Catholic congregation - that on Sunday evenings has a lay-led youth service called Moot. It uses music evolved from the club scene and an interactive style of worship. The congregation, which numbers 25 to 35, meets in "cells" - or small groups - for prayer mid-week and then gathers to worship. Gareth Powell, 27, a lay leader who works for the Church Mission Society, said the aim of Moot was to "proclaim afresh the Gospel to a new generation".

"We seek to reframe, not diminish, the ancient traditions so as to make them accessible to the modern Generation X, and we have

points of gathering - Moot and the Sunday morning congregation are doing the Lent course together."

An ageing congregation in the pretty Buckinghamshire town of Haddenham realised it had to take action and last summer started Café Plus on the first Sunday of the month. It runs from 9.30 a.m. to 12.30 p.m. in the village hall with coffee, breakfast and newspapers in one room, another devoted to children's work, and a youth club. There is a talk called "Food for Thought" with a Christian message - but no service or pleas for people to come to church.

Tim Shaw, 44, one of the instigators of Café Plus, said: "The congregation looked at itself and thought, 'Blimey! We're all 70 and there are no new people.' I am 44 and I joined the church 20 years ago and I am still the youngest." Café Plus attracts as many as 140 people - double the number going to the traditional service - and includes many who have never gone to a normal Sunday service.

Based in Lincoln, Pete Pillinger travels the country offering spiritual direction to churches that want to change. "If you don't take risks you don't get anywhere. God is not terribly safe and we need to follow what God wants us to do."

"Of course we are doing what we can to prevent things going wrong but there is no reason to assume that a new expression is more liable to go wrong than a traditional one. Staying where we are is not any healthier."

The Church of England had a nasty shock 10 years ago when the Revd Chris Brain, the priest running the Nine O'Clock Service - a huge and much praised youth church in Sheffield - was found to be involved in improper relations with young women in his congregation.

Since then the Church of England has attempted to improve monitoring of alternative services and groups. The General Synod is considering a Diocesan Mission and Pastoral Measure that would give legal recognition to non-parochial churches and congregations. There is also a training course called Expressions for lay people spread over eight evenings and three weekends for a cost of about £300. This prepares them to lead the new congregations.

At the moment those listed in the Fresh Expressions directory are affiliated to a parish church, deanery or diocese, and are overseen by the clergy - although most of the meet-

ings happen without any overt clergy involvement except in a Eucharist service.

One religious affairs commentator, who asked not to be named, was dubious about the effectiveness of Fresh Expressions. "So many churches are closing, and so many people leaving congregations, the Fresh Expressions directory would have to increase a thousandfold to make up the difference. It strikes me that the Church of England is doing a good job at rearranging the deckchairs on the *Titanic*."

Those involved in the innovating of new congregations do not dwell on the negatives. I interviewed the Revd Rob Harrison, vicar of St John's, Hillingdon, Middlesex, who now runs a Rolling Church every Sunday which starts at 8 a.m. with Morning Prayer and finishes at 1 p.m. with "food and friendship". He has seen only a 5 per cent increase in his congregation - but he keeps going.

The aim of Rolling Worship is to reduce the anxiety that people, and particularly parents, feel about turning up for a service at a certain time and not being able to leave when they want.

I put it to the test by arriving with my five-year-old son and four-year-old daughter in the middle of one of the 10 half-hour slots called "Understanding our faith". The welcome was good. In most ways St John's is an old expression of church: there are old oak pews, stained-glass windows and at least half the congregation has silver hair. But Rob Harrison had the children sitting at the altar and all the congregation writing down what they felt guilty about and then using a pile of rubbers on the altar to rub out their words. There was an adult baptism and the vicar played the saxophone to "Praise my soul the King of Heaven".

"There is no excuse for people to moan because they don't have to be at the bits they don't like," said Harrison, 43. "We did lose one member of the congregation over this but the other moany-groanies are now enthusiastic and our worship is enriched."

I met two mothers with babes in arms, Sian and Louise, who had joined the congregation in the last few months because of the welcome they received and the family-friendly atmosphere. "I have not been going to church for years and I feel whole again. It is as if I had lost something precious and I have found it," said Sian.

Angela Craven, a member of the congregation for the last 30 years, admitted she had had "reservations" about the new service. "I am still not sure about the coffee and biscuits being served in the body of the church but much more important than that is the atmosphere and there is a nice social feeling."

Fresh Expressions has certainly injected some enthusiasm and hope into the Methodist and Anglican Churches and relaxed the boundaries between the denominations. It will be interesting to see whether growth continues at such a pace and whether the Churches' methods of monitoring will allow such unusual innovations.