

## **Emerging Church for an emerging culture**

by Ian Mobsby

Given the assumption that we accept the validity of liquid modernity or post modernity (see earlier article), then we need to face quite a challenge. What does it mean to be 'church' in such a brave new world defined by consumption and individualism? How do we build connections between Christians in some form of relationship and what does church look, taste and smell like in a new context? To start with, I want to express my enthusiasm about change. We human beings do not generally like change. However, I sense great opportunities for us to be creative and inventive, to try and correct some of the institutional control and abuse of things that have been done in the name of 'church'. We live in exciting times, and we can play an active part in shaping ways of being church in our present.

Firstly, we need to unpack key themes of 'being church'. I am going to use terms and concepts used by Alistair McGrath in his book 'Introduction to theology' concerning the doctrine of the church. Once we have got these ideas straight, we can unpack ways of being church that are authentically Christian and reflective our current culture.

A key starting place is the Nicene Creed - Church as a 'holy, catholic and apostolic' body. Such phrases such as a priesthood of all believers, and Koinoina - the worldwide fellowship of Christians is key, (see essay on this later). Holy, as we are accepted and loved by God and called by Jesus into discipleship that enables us to belong, and through Christ be priests as well as brother and sisters. This does leave us with the paradox about us, our relationships and what we do as Christians as holy, even though we are still broken and incomplete, on our journeys of human becoming. So we immediately see that we live in what has been called 'now but not yet' times of the kingdom of God. Hence the crap that has been done in the name of church. From this we get the idea that the church is imperfect in its 'now but not yetness'. Augustine has helped us with the idea of visible and invisible church. The invisible - is the fulfilled, the healed, the truly Christian, where visible includes our brokenness. So Church as we all know is an imperfect expression of humanity but God apparently still loves it.

Continuing with us unpacking concepts of authentic Church, are the ideas of Christ's presence in the Church. That Christ is present through the sacraments such as communion/Eucharist - as activities that bring Christ into our present - as acts of grace. Secondly is Christ's presence through the Holy Spirit - openness to prayer, healing and the rest as worship and prayer. Thirdly is the idea of Christ's presence through the proclamation of the gospel - the saying and hearing of the stories of God and in particular the stories of the face of God, Jesus the incarnation.

From my own perspective, we get the idea of the centrality of relationships - relationships to each other and relationship with the trinity, which is itself, an expression of perfect relationship. Scripturally we see that the people of God get the identity not as individuals but by a sense of dependence to God's otherness, and that God chooses to use us in our collectiveness rather than in our individualness. Both these concepts, in our individualistic and therapeutic world, are distinctly counter cultural today. Further, we are called to follow Christ as the disciples followed Christ - to do worship mission and community through the relational.

Now we know that since its inception the church has stuffed up, it has often been schismed through conflict and heresy through its network nature, and then oppressed by over authoritative male dominated structures that then stifle the people from God to follow their incarnational calling. The Church has often been too 'them and us', removed and arrogant. We should be haunted by Jesus' interactions with the Pharisees as they too made the same mistake.

The arrogance and aggression that we see and hear from the modern church as structures and organisation reduces - continues to bring schism and removal from involvement in the grass roots. We know, that most of the western post-industrialised nations churches are predominately over 60s. That most are post or un Christian, and being Christian is not really cool to say the least.

So where do we start? Well for me the starting place is being in the real world. From there is the sense of relationships. So lets look at what worship, mission and community could look like, relating this to my hopes and dreams.

Firstly in the last 15 years we have seen the rise of alternative and creative worship. This worship is profoundly sensitive to our current cultural context - which subverts activities, images, film and music to draw out a spiritual meaning which is profoundly helpful as a tool, (see [www.alternative-worship.org](http://www.alternative-worship.org)). The power of this for me was modelled in the labyrinth which as a worship experience - is now travelling all over the world and is profoundly hope giving the way it has transcended cultural/spiritual divides. This type of worship enables encounter with God the transcendent yet imminent - in new ways. Moot services are an attempt to do this also. It is relational, it attempts to use creativity to promote imagination and encounter, and uses the metaphorical including naming God to enable people experience something of the reality of God in our world. Such worship experimentation is key to our future. It must model a way of worshipping that is not in/out but welcoming and engaging and not boring.

When looking at community, there is a need to build and embed relationships, but not in control structures or cults - but an empowering/envisioning of growing together - of being there when it matters, of love and mutual acceptance - to laugh and cry. Not very British I know, but as things become increasingly fluid such places of belonging are becoming increasingly oasis in a busy desert of the lonely and isolated.

Mission is the greatest challenge. For me there are key points. Making connections of encounter through the arts, the use of discussion forums, relational growth not for numbers but for a vision of being. It will need to be able to cope with us in our fragmented states, to grow. It will need to feel uncomfortable and at times hard work. We need to be creative in how we be church. For example I have always wanted to do cafe church - to build a consumption purpose to serve a locality - to build relationships that are real, and then the arts and being church on top of that. Can you imagine what that would look like? Interestingly this model is being done in other places (see cafe churches in the links page of the moot site). Even Building societies such as Abbey National and Costa Coffee have caught this vision, to draw people. It is no co-incidence that we see Jesus munching his way with others in the New Testament all the time, and that communion is the focus of being church. So why not commercialise that function at the centre? How exciting would that be..... I dream and wish I had lots of money to take such a risk.

Some rightly have said that we need to be counter cultural to such an apolitical and selfish culture. I would agree with the thought, but not its application that we continue to do out of date church. We can interpret the many denominations as attempts to reconnect with culture as it moved on - so that church did not loose touch. I would propose that we are to be counter cultural by our understandings, dreams and hopes. Our identity in God is profoundly counter cultural, which through relationships built the church in the first place. It is time to return to this original model in our own times. We need to experiment with being church. That everything we do, everything that we are is being church - whether it's an art gallery, a meditation, drink with friends..... we can't stop being incarnational. So now we need to wipe the white board clean and explore ways of being church that enables our friends and those we have connection to, find and be with God through us in a new way of being church sensitive to our times. It could be brilliant if we take some risks!!!

Ian Mobsby