

The importance of unity in a changing church.

A changing church

A theological college Principal I know well commented recently that he was training people for ministry in a church which in twenty years neither they nor he would recognise. I want to explore that a little. In some senses it is manifestly true. We live in a world that is at once profoundly secular and deeply religious. The bulk of the population are thoroughly uninterested in religion, yet benignly tolerant of those who practice, provided they don't interfere with the British way of moderation in all things. Simultaneously, we have become deeply religious. That is partly a result of migration. Like Brits abroad, African, Asian and Caribbean immigrants have brought their faith with them as tortoises their shells – whether that faith be Islam, Hinduism, Sikhism or various brands of Christianity. The shape of our city skylines where mosques and temples jostle with church steeples is implicit evidence of the seriousness with which faith is taken within the other world faiths that are now part of our nation. That has led to an ironic paradox of religion – there is considerable public interest in the role of religion in a secular democracy at precisely the point where the institutions of faith are declining. If the face of English religion has changed, so too has Christianity. Let me suggest three ways in which it has changed:

a) Migration, black-led churches and the growth of Pentecostalism

Let's begin in London, which is not co-terminus with England, whatever it might think, but what happens in London often anticipates what will happen elsewhere. According to the 2013 London Church Census, church attendance grew in London by 16% - 9% of the population now attend church. In the same period 700 new places of worship were registered – a growth of 17%. The growth is amongst black and migrant churches who account for 27% of Christian places of worship and 24% of all churchgoers. In inner London almost 48% of worshippers were black. The capital also accounts for an astonishing proportion of the country's young adult Christians simply because of jobs. For these reasons London has bucked the trend of decline.¹ Most large conurbations in England could tell a similar story about the growth of migrant churches. It's important that we also acknowledge that alongside the growth of immigrant churches there has been a maturing and deepening of the experience and ministries of indigenous English Pentecostal and charismatic churches, many of them independent or part of networks like Pioneer.

b) The growth of experiential religion

The tone of church life is increasingly Evangelical, more praise band than organ. But that isn't the whole story either. Cathedrals and large collegiate churches with a strong liturgical /choral tradition also note an increase in their congregations. What matters, we might deduce, is experience. Put bluntly, what sells church to people is a spiritual experience, a meeting with the Other. And more people are encountering the Other through charismatic gifts or exquisite liturgy than through the more cerebral ways of the historic Free Churches and

¹Clive Field 'London churchgoing and other news' www.brin.ac.uk. Posted June 14 2013

middle of the road Anglicanism. That, I think is just a matter of observation, and I make it as someone who finds God in cerebral rather than charismatic ways. Catholicism is of course a case apart, but my Catholic friends tell me that the pattern of immigrant growth and indigenous decline is one that mirrors their own experience..

c) Radical experiment

Then we have the courageous attempts to evangelise secular England – the Fresh Expressions, the Pioneer Ministers, those who seek to do church differently, on the edge. Its too early to draw definite conclusions yet, but you can begin to see why my College Principal friend thought as he thought. A mixed economy of Christian life is a present reality, as well as a future prospect. Since 1990 when we were founded, CTE's membership has grown from 16 to 44 churches. That is just the tip of the iceberg of increasing diversity.

A changing context

If the church is changing, so too is the wider landscape of the relationship between church and society. What we are experiencing is the disappearance of Christian nominalism and the raising of the bar of church membership. Professor Linda Woodhead of Lancaster University has been researching this for a long time. Watch out for her book, due to be published next month, *That was the church that was: how the Church of England lost the English people*. I hasten to add that not only is she an Anglican herself, but her husband is an Anglican priest!

What she and other sociologists of religion have observed is those people who in the past rarely or never attended church but thought of themselves as Christian now describe themselves as having no religion. Linda Woodhead argues that the tipping point has now been reached because 46% of the populace describe themselves as having 'no religion' - and when that is broken down by age profile, we discover that 60% of 18-24 year olds and 55% of 25-39 year olds so describe themselves. 'No religion' is the new norm amongst those under 40. That is reflected in the inverse relationship between the decline of church weddings and the growth of civil marriages, and increasingly in the growth of secular funerals. Woodhead argues that '...this trend will continue because nones tend to be young whereas Christians tend to be old; nones are being hatched whilst Christians are being dispatched.' No religion is Britain's new religion².

There are at least two ways in which this evidence can be assessed. News headline – Christians actually believe something. The Church of England's own most recent figures estimate its worshipping community as 1.1 million – 2% of the population, and even if loose Christmas attendance is included it only rises to 4.3%, and the overall figure for all churches is probably about 10%.³ But at least they believe something. Its about conversion and commitment and practising the faith. Loud applause from the Evangelical camp.

But there is another way of looking at it. News headline: church and society divorce. Millions stop going to church. It's a bit like Tesco and Sainsburys suddenly waking up and finding that all their customers are in the aisles of Aldi and Lidl.

² For Woodhead's comments, see her lecture 'Why no religion is the new religion', can be accessed here: http://www.britac.ac.uk/events/2016/Why_no_religion_is_the_new_religion.cfm.

³ Andrew Atherton 'Religious "Nones" on the rise, but what's the truth behind the data?. An Evangelical theologian explains.' (*The Tablet* 28 Jan 2016)

Why has this happened? Libraries of books have been written about this, but at the risk of being crude and blunt, the moral and sexual revolution of the long 1960s exacerbated the strained relationship between the church and the British people. Tolerance and the right of individual choice are deeply engrained British characteristics. The nones are deeply wedded to those liberal values – as indeed are many Christians who, as Linda Woodhead discovered, blithely ignore the statements of their churches on the key moral issues of the day.

But, to the nones, previously nominal Christians, and a potent mission field, for only 13% of them self-designate as ‘atheist’, the church seems to be progressively raising the bar of membership, retreating behind walls of sectarianism and making greater and greater demands. As Linda Woodhead noted in a recent lecture, slightly tongue in cheek, once all you had to do to be a Christian in England was to be born and baptised, then came confirmation, then regular church attendance, then a substantial financial commitment, and now we find we’re supposed to be preaching the gospel. And, the unforgiveable sin, church isn’t tolerant – it didn’t allow the divorced to re-marry, even if they wanted to, it wouldn’t allow women through a glass ceiling, and its anti-gay and anti-same-sex marriage.

It is important to note that we have made choices for it to look like that – go to Scandinavia and you will find that a very different set of choices have been made around the same issues. In England conservatives have won the day, and the shoppers have chosen to go elsewhere. I’m not passing a judgement on that, I’m simply observing.

So, my College Principal friend is training people for a church which will be multi-cultural, diverse, a minority culture in an increasingly liberal society, where the agenda is one of mission and engagement and bridge-building into worlds which increasingly have no residual knowledge of the Christian story.

The importance of unity

Why should unity be important to this changing church? The union Unison produced a wonderful TV advert a few years back. A big, shaggy cartoon bear was sitting in the middle of a path, self-absorbed and happy. A tiny ant came along the road and couldn’t get by, so he shouted ‘Excuse me’, but the bear heard nothing and continued to have a lovely scratch. The ant disappeared and came back with a friend. ‘Excuse me’, they shouted, ‘please can we get by?’ But bear scratched on. The two ants disappeared and came back with an army of ants, ‘Excuse me’ they shrilled at a decibel level that even the bear heard, and off he shot into the middle distance. And the strapline appeared, ‘If you want to be heard, speak in unison.’

None of us, not even the best resourced churches, have the resources to address our culture alone. The task of re-evangelisation, of building bridges into the land of ‘no religion’ is one which demands all our skills and resources. We need each other as we proclaim the lordship of Jesus and the coming of the kingdom in both word and deed. Co-operation is of the essence. Unity is always a gift. It is rarely something that we build, it is generally something that God gives.

I think we are experiencing a remarkable gift of the Spirit in our day. Churches that ten years ago would have looked askance at each other are now co-operating together in countless projects to serve the communities in which they are placed. The old labels of ‘evangelical’, ‘liberal’, ‘catholic’, are increasingly irrelevant. There are new alliances and organisations forming across the country, new ecumenical realities. Sometimes they grow out of a clergy

prayer breakfast, sometimes from the vision of a Churches Together Group, sometimes out of an initiative like Hope. They are profoundly service and mission focused.

Unity isn't a brand; Churches Together isn't a brand – it is simply the reality of England's churches doing things together. Churches Together becomes a reality when that happens. It doesn't need constitutions and legalities, it simply needs inspiration and the will to do things together. And wherever and whenever that happens, we give thanks.

That is, if you like, the simple level of unity. Its co-operation, and it should happen in the church just like it happens in science, in sport and in industry. We are none of us islands, entire of ourselves, we are all parts of continents, as John Donne once nearly said.

But, and it's a massive but, all Christians are part of the same continent, Jesus Christ. We are united with him by the sacrament of baptism and the mystery of faith, and if we are one with him we are one with each other, brothers and sisters in Christ, a new humanity. That means that unity is much more than co-operation. I want to finish then, by re-visiting John's gospel, which meditates so profoundly on the relationship between Jesus, God and believers. John uses the memorable image of the vine and its branches to explore that reality. Jesus talks at length in John's gospel about 'abiding' – 'Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit because apart from me you can do nothing.' (John 15:4-5)

At the heart of Christian living is that relationship between Father and Son into which we are mysteriously caught up. It is because Jesus is the true vine that he can later pray, 'As you Father are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us...' (Jn 17:21). As the vine he makes that unity a reality. And we bear much fruit. What is that fruit? We automatically assume that it must be mission or good works, but John doesn't say that. Jesus simply says 'My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples' (15:9).

We do John a mis-service if we assume that somehow the being of God can be separated from the love of God, or the fruit from the vine, or doctrine from ethics. John's God is, as the first epistle of John reminds us, 'love' (1 John 4:8, 16). Being part of the vine is relational, it is about love for God and love for each other, it is about *being* love, not simply doing it. That is what it means to share the life of Jesus. And the result, says Jesus, is joy (Jn 15:11).

The fruit of the vine is abiding in the love of Jesus, just as Jesus abides in the love of the Father, and that brings joy. It brings joy and rest because it's not our work, but that of the vinedresser. Fruit here then, isn't missional language, it is primarily language about the relationship between God in Christ and those who believe through the Paraclete-Spirit. John reminds us that the heart of the gospel and the meaning of life is 'abiding' in the very life of the Trinity. The joy and peace of 'abiding' isn't a privatised, individual experience, although it clearly has a mystical, personal dimension. Jesus' language is resolutely plural (that is clear in the Greek). This is about the life of the Christian community and the ways in which we relate to each other within that community, although that community is intensely varied. Even the most isolated hermit exists as part of the community which is the vine. That is why unity is important. It is not an optional extra. It's not just that the common mission agenda that we face leads us to realise the value of co-operating, it is that being part of the new humanity which has its headship in Christ is what the gospel is actually about. In the New Jerusalem

according to *Revelation* there is no mission, but there is one united community caught up in continual praise of God.

Mission should be about introducing people to the radical new humanity of God-in-Christ. But that unity is worthless unless it is a foretaste of the unity of the whole *oikoumene*, the whole created world which will be when God's will is finally done and all is gathered up into Christ as head. Mission and unity are inseparable parts of the same reality of being in Christ.

To sum up then, we've seen how church is changing – more diverse, radical experiments in mission, new forms of ecumenical encounter, all set against the thinning and over-stretched resources of the historic churches and the changes that engenders. We've also glimpsed some of the ways in which society is changing as 'no religion' becomes the default religion of England. Then we've considered the pragmatic case for unity in the light of that missional challenge, and the theological and spiritual unity which we share by default as those who abide in Christ, and we've seen that mission and unity are inseparable parts of the same reality.

Unity is important, because it holds the disparate together in tension. As an ecumenist I note that we hold many different positions on human sexuality within the body of Christ, yet somehow we manage to recognise each other as fellow Christians, despite those differences. That is an experience of grace. My question to the churches, if Professor Woodhead is right, is how do we develop mission strategies that will introduce those who have 'no religion' to the Jesus I know who had little patience with religious and ethical structures like the Sabbath which got in the way of people's relationship with God. How do we help the society of no religion understand the peace and joy which is life in the vine?