

Building a missional church: Week 1 - Our changed context

“But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect.” (1 Peter 3:15)

We live today in a society where churchgoing has become a quaint pastime and the truth something you can sidestep simply by preferring ‘alternative facts’.

Church attendance in Britain shows an almost unbroken decline for the past fifty years and unless something changes the Church of England would cease to exist within another half-century. It is clear that we cannot simply continue doing what we’ve done in the past – in the words often ascribed to Albert Einstein, *“Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results”*.

This is first of five studies for Lent during which we shall think how our mission-field has changed and so how we must change our thinking and action if we are to bring the gospel message to those around us.

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Post-Modernism

“The only absolute truth is that there are no absolute truths.” (Paul Feyerabend)

Britain today seems to be moving into what is often labelled post-modernism - as its very name implies, a transitional phase to something we do not yet know. While hard to pin down, we can see it exemplified by changes such as the move from “Is it true?” to “Does it work for me?”; from living with a purpose, to living for now; from belief in objective reality to subjective reality.

It has been said that the key to post-modernism is an unwillingness to accept any overarching answer to ‘life, the universe and everything’; to reject, even mock, the idea that there could be such an answer.

What does this mean for us as we try to share the greatest ‘overarching answer’ – the good news of Jesus – with such people?

What changes in our worship or other activities might help us communicate the gospel in today’s society?

Social trends in the last 30 years

As well as deeper underlying changes, life around us has been transformed in many ways over the past few decades; to consider just a few...

Consumerism

We were once shaped by what we produce; now we are shaped by what we consume. It appears that the core value of society has moved from ‘progress’ to ‘choice’. Individuals pay more attention to how they feel and to what they think makes sense – to their subjective views of the world.

The church has no alternative but to work in a consumer society, although it must avoid being of it. Too often though Christians in the west judge a church by what it provides for us and move on if we get a better offer elsewhere. **How then can we challenge a consumerist approach to life and faith, while also following the good missionary principle of meeting people where they are?**

Networks

We live in a society that is both fragmenting and connecting at the same time. It’s been said that, “To live in one place no longer means to live together and to live together no longer means living in the same place.” As people around us find their lives compartmentalised into multiple communities each

formed around a different network – locality, interest, work etc - **how can we connect with those whose lives we only ever touch tangentially?**

Churchgoing

In Britain between 1980 and 2015 church attendance declined from 6,484,300 to 3,081,500 (11.8% to 5.0% of the population). On average, that's almost 2000 fewer people in church each and every week across that whole period.

You may find it useful to look at some of the information on religious affiliation and church attendance in the work of the Church Growth Research programme, both [here](#) and [here](#).

It seems though that people don't necessarily stop believing when they do stop belonging. Recent research estimates that around a million Christians in Britain no longer belong to a church.

Why is it you think that believers sometimes lose the church 'habit'? Is it their fault or ours? How can we help them come back?

Other work suggests that individual's religious 'affiliation' isn't likely to change once they reach their early 20s as shown by the Church Growth Research work referenced above. A major cause of the reduction in numbers in the church – perhaps just over half - is each generation's failure to reach younger people as they grow up.

A key question: how can we help young people find faith and life in the community of the church?

Spirituality

In the early 2000s, a major survey in Kendal, Cumbria asked respondents to select a statement that best described their 'core beliefs about spirituality'.

- 40% equated spirituality with 'love' or being 'a caring or decent person';
- 34% selected 'being in touch with subtle energies', 'healing oneself and others' or 'living life to the full';
- just 7% agreed that spirituality was 'obeying God's will'.

The same research found that in the area there were 126 groups and providers describing what they did as spiritual alongside just 25 Christian congregations. At least one Bishop responded by saying that they had no business using the word 'spiritual' as it was "a Christian concept which belonged to the church".

If people today want to explore spirituality, they probably don't think of looking at the church. What does this say about us? How do you feel about what the bishop said?

Prayer

Almighty God,

You call your people to proclaim afresh in every generation the good news of Jesus your Son.

By the power of your Spirit rekindle in us gifts of courage & compassion.

Open our eyes to see your grace at work beyond our church buildings & institutions.

Help us to work with you in building communities of faith allowing your mission to be expressed in our hurting world.

May we proclaim afresh your faithfulness and constant love in a changing and uncertain world.

For the building of your kingdom and to the glory of your name.

Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen