

'FONDANT CHURCH'

THAWING THE CHURCH FOR MISSION IN
THE 21ST CENTURY

BY PAUL DOWLING

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For Roger Grainger and the team at St. John's Church, Wakefield, for their love
and support and for making this sabbatical possible.

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INTRODUCTION

In the 2002/3 Annual Review of the Church of England, the Archbishop of Canterbury writes:

"What it is to be the Church is a more interesting question than it has seemed for a long time. If the Church is the community that happens when people meet the living Christ, we can't assume too quickly that we know exactly what it ought to look like. But more and more we need the skills to recognise when such meetings happen and to work with them in patience and hope."

But are we as a Church ready to look for, recognise and support such meetings, or are we so tied in our thinking to what we believe the Church does look like that we fail either to spot them or to be ready to make such changes as will allow such meetings to flourish and grow?

John Drane has written in his book 'The MacDonaldization of the Church' :

"It must be obvious that the Church simply cannot expect to continue to survive for long into the twenty-first century in its present form... Merely doing more of the same will not be the way that the Gospel will be communicated effectively to those increasing millions who are searching for something that will make life more tolerable and hold out the prospect of personal fulfilment." (p. 156)

Mike Riddell puts it more starkly:

"The Christian Church is dying in the West. This painful fact is the cause of a great deal of avoidance in the Christian community. To use terminology drawn from pastoral care, the terminally sick patient is somewhere between denial and bargaining" ('The Threshold of the Future' p. 1)

Many other writers make similar points and, indeed, we hear increasing talk within the Church of England (and other denominations) of how current structures will soon reach a point where they will become unsustainable. The word 'Meltdown' is even whispered occasionally. Many Dioceses are facing financial crisis and the inevitability of cutbacks in clergy numbers with consequent strain on the remaining clergy and parishes. We are faced with the choice between being resigned to a continuing spiral of decline or carrying out a serious search for another way of being the Church in today's world.

This report is an attempt to look at what the structure and organisation of the Church might look like if we are to respond to the challenge of being a missionary Church in our present culture. It arises out of a sabbatical project in June, July and August 2003 during which I visited a number of people in the UK who are either involved in pioneering ventures within the Church or in teaching, writing or research in this area. I also spent a month in France, mainly with Protestant churches in Paris and Aix-en-Provence, looking at the situation there. France is a country where social change has impacted, if anything, more severely on the life of the Church than in the UK. It has many cultural similarities to our own situation, but also significant differences and,

therefore, provides an interesting window through which to see our own context in a fresh light. The project was also undergirded by considerable reading around the subject and by the assistance of Canon John Holmes, Wakefield Diocesan Missioner and the Reverend George Lings of the Church Army Sheffield Centre, to both of whom much thanks.

The report simply presents a number of common themes that have emerged from my discussions and reading and then attempts to draw some conclusions from them. There is relatively little theological exploration, simply the underlying assumption that the Church exists to be a sign of the Kingdom of God in the world, to offer the hope of the Christian Gospel to every member of society and to call people to enter the community of those who seek to follow Jesus Christ. I offer it, not as a major theological study, but as the reflection of a practitioner struggling with these issues in my daily ministry.

A) FIVE RECURRING THEMES

1. RELATIONSHIPS NOT INSTITUTION

If there was one theme that ran through almost every encounter, it was that of **relationships**. This seems to hold the key to everything else. This should not surprise us as Christians, for if the two great commandments are to love God and to love one another, that puts our relationships with God and with others at the heart of all we are and do. And we live in a culture that is looking for (though not always finding) real authentic relationships

However the Church as an institution doesn't always seem to embody this. A visitor to the average Anglican Church on a Sunday morning might be forgiven for failing to spot that close loving relationships is what we are about! Somehow the buildings, the pews, our reluctance to sit near each other, the divide between those leading worship and passive participants speak louder than all the good things that may be said from the pulpit or in the liturgy. And some of the many who have left churches over the last few years say that they are looking for a depth of relationship they didn't find in the Church (Interview with Stuart Murray-Williams).

David Brown, originally from England, has spent many years in France planting churches within the France-Mission stream. His church plant in the difficult urban area of Le Blanc Mesnil near Paris has grown from nothing to sixty people in just six years. He has recently written two excellent books in French looking at the issues this report is about from a French perspective - 'Une eglise pour aujourd'hui' ('A church for today') and 'Passerelles' ('Footbridges'). I am greatly indebted to his thinking. (The quotations in this report are my own translation from the French). He quotes a youth organisation leader at a seminar as saying: "We have noticed a strong rejection among students of all that is institutional. In other words, 'L'eglise - NON; l'institution - NON; Dieu - OUI'" ('Une eglise pour aujourd'hui' p. 67). Stuart Murray and Anne Wilkinson-Hayes write: "It is our conviction that we live in a society that is heartily sick of Christianity and the institutional Church but that has yet to encounter the radical Jesus" ('Hope from the margins' p.24). And as long ago as 1984 the Roman Catholic writer Carlo Carretto wrote "The great official, solemn church, replete with ceremony, with visible power, with numbers, no longer impresses. Today's people, knowing the anguish of loneliness, want a church made of friendship, of genuine contacts, of mutual interchange, of little things." ('I sought and I found - my experience of God and the Church').

We need to find ways of putting relationships back at the heart of our Church life if we are to reach out to and embrace those around us. These need to be authentic relationships, where we can learn to be vulnerable with one another, to share laughter and tears, to be accountable one to another. We need to replace meetings with meeting. "Meetings must not be moments where we hide from each other behind fine phrases. Perhaps we should cancel all such 'meetings'... in order to replace them with moments of real encounter." (David Brown 'Une eglise pour aujourd'hui' p. 74). At Christchurch, South Ossett, near Wakefield, they asked the question: "What would a church based around relationships look like?" and introduced cell groups as a way of

putting relationships back at the heart of the church, rather than activity. The cells are intended to be places of real commitment to one another and sharing of lives in community. "The essential role of a life cell is the fellowship lived out there. Laughing or crying together, praying for each other, encouraging each other and exercising spiritual gifts towards each other. I would say that that is the church - and Sunday morning worship becomes a celebration of the churches" (David Brown 'Une eglise pour aujourd'hui' p. 76).

We need to learn to become friends not just fellow churchgoers. And we need to learn to do this in a way that is open to include those currently outside the Church community. This will mean finding settings where we meet in small numbers, share food and talk openly, sharing doubts and fears, joys and sorrows. It will mean meeting in venues where it is easy for outsiders to join in and holding bridge events where people can bring their friends without anxiety. In short it means escaping from the institutional straitjacket and making the Church human again.

As Mike Riddell writes "The challenge of the next millennium lies in the humanisation of the Church" ('Threshold of the Future' p. 127). David Brown in 'Passerelles' says: "The new humanity is the church. This is an extraordinary challenge addressed to Christians" (p. 82). And, in his book 'Which way for the Church?', Rob Frost writes: "The Church of the new millennium will understand that its communal life is a sign of the kingdom of God. The church will become the antidote for the fragmentation of the family and the breakdown of human relationships. It will work to counter the lonely isolation in which countless millions will live their lives." (p. 129)

Experience confirms that for most people the journey to a living faith lies through a relationship with a Christian friend. People in our present culture are so far removed from a Christian understanding that it is hard for them to make the transition without someone to accompany them on the way. And often participation in the church community precedes committed faith ('belonging before believing'). This means encouraging Church members to form close relationships with those outside the Church and allowing them the time to develop those relationships. "There is no short cut to sharing the gospel without making a personal investment" (David Brown 'Une eglise pour aujourd'hui' p. 68). "It is no longer enough for me simply to evangelise you by proclamation; we must first enter into a meaningful relationship and a meaningful conversation" (Rob Frost quoted in David Hilborn 'Picking up the pieces' p. 183). It also means providing opportunities for those currently outside the Church to experience the church community in a relaxed setting such as a social event.

Examples

1) 'The Net' in Huddersfield is a Church specifically set up to reach unchurched people through networks of relationships. The leaders teach constantly about the importance of relationships in evangelism and hold regular bridge events to which members can invite their friends. The Church has grown significantly over the four years of its life, almost entirely through relationships with existing members. One member has said: "This is not a Church you go to, it's a Church you belong to."

2) The independent Protestant Church 'Le Chemin' in Aix-en-Provence from time to time replace their normal Sunday morning service with what they call 'Culte Café Croissant' (Coffee and croissant worship). This is an occasion specifically designed for members to invite their friends. The Church is laid out like a café and breakfast is served. They sing one or two worship songs and there is a short talk, usually a personal testimony, plus plenty of opportunity to discuss in a relaxed way round the tables.

Would it not be wonderful if we could see happening in the English Church what David Brown wishes for France: "I would love it so much if the post-modern French person could rediscover the Church and, on seeing how Christians live, might exclaim: 'Here is what I have always wanted to be!'"? ('Passerelles'p. 85).

2. UNITY IN DIVERSITY

The second theme flows naturally from the first. If the church is based on relationships, what do we do when we experience tensions in those relationships arising from differences in outlook, experience or approach? A Church that divides over every disagreement has nothing to say to a divided world. "Where moral imperatives are implied by the gospel, a divided Church undermines such teaching and fails to offer a prophetic and healing vision" ('Pilgrims' by Stephen Platten p. 153). We follow a God who himself exists in united loving relationship within the diversity of the Trinity. We need to find ways of holding our diversity within an overriding unity. This means that the day of 'one size fits all' is over. The Church of England has suffered for too long from trying to be the Church for everybody while still insisting we all have to do things the same way (Common Prayer, Common Worship). This will no longer work in a world of choice and diversity. We need to find our unity in other ways, with relationships at the centre.

Once again, the key to Christian witness is the quality of our common life. "The quality of Church life is a vitally important issue for evangelism...if the Christian faith can offer a radically different agenda, a distinctive style of life to those available elsewhere, it will have a great appeal to many people." ('The Provocative Church' by Graham Tomlin, p.8). What we are is more important than what we do - and what we model is more important than what we preach. The Church needs to be what Rob Frost calls "... a place of many welcomes where diverse people groups will find a place of their own in the rich family of God's people." ('Which way for the Church?' p. 93). Different people respond to different styles and therefore our love for our neighbour demands that we adopt a variety of approaches, what Stephen Platten calls a 'kaleidoscopic approach' to mission ('Pilgrims' p. 141) and David Brown 'Eglise à la carte' ('Une eglise pour aujourd'hui' chapter 9, p. 139). This may include the offering of worship at different times and in different styles, small groups of varying natures, meetings in pubs, clubs and homes, themed occasions around film or art, social events. One Church is even attempting to offer variety within one event: "We are looking towards a longer, three-hour period on Sundays. We are aiming to offer people a range of activities, which will take place in different areas of the building at the same time. These will include quiet prayer, personal ministry, drinking coffee, talking or joining the main church worship. Apart from a central section in which everyone will be together, they will be able to choose from a 'menu' of other things" (Alan Evans of the Holme Project in Bradford, quoted in 'Picking up the pieces' by David Hilborn p. 49). Obviously there will be a limit to what one local church can provide, and it is important to be realistic about resources. Perhaps this is an indication that we may need to work together with other churches and denominations.

Examples

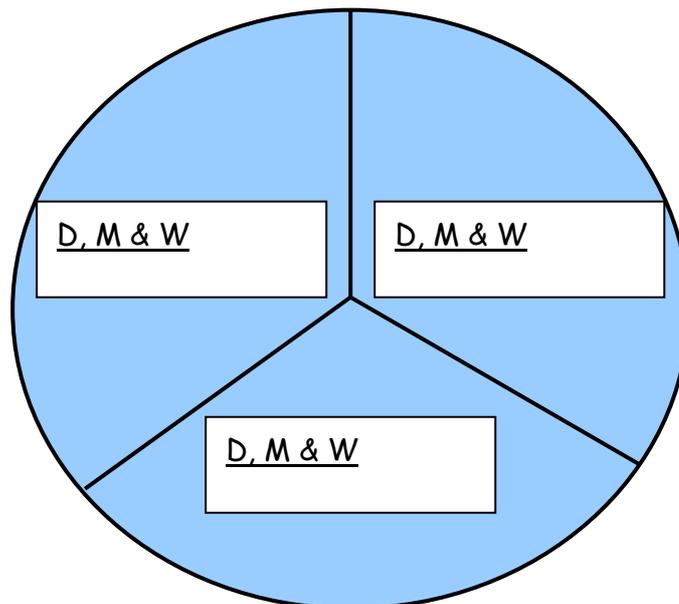
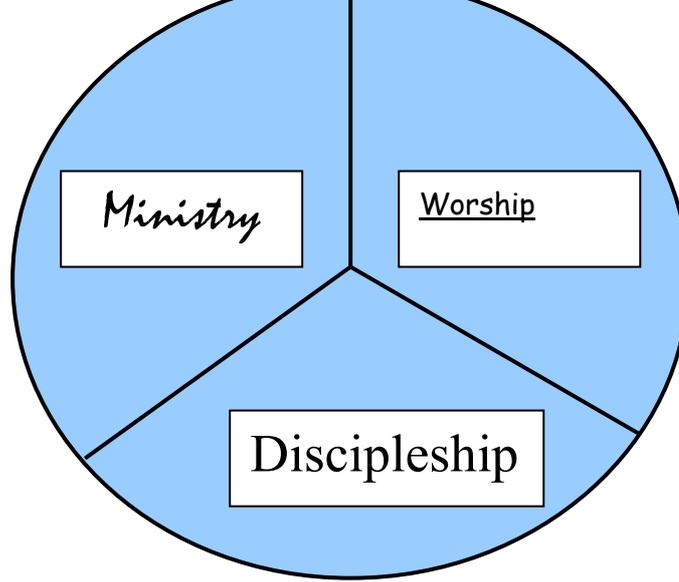
- 1) Wakefield Baptist Church has recently adopted what they call 'Portfolio Church'. This recognises that every member of the Church needs to be involved in some form of worship, of learning and growing and of service as their participation in the life of the Church, but that the way these are expressed need not be the same for everyone. Consequently the Church has established a menu of opportunities for

each of these three areas and encourages each member to make a choice from the menu as to which of the opportunities on offer they are going to avail themselves of. They envisage the Church growing into a 'community of communities' undergirded by a common set of values. I attach on the following page the diagrammatic representation. The top diagram represents traditional church, the middle one multi-congregation church and the messy one at the bottom Portfolio Church. Messy seems to be another key word in thinking about the church in the future!

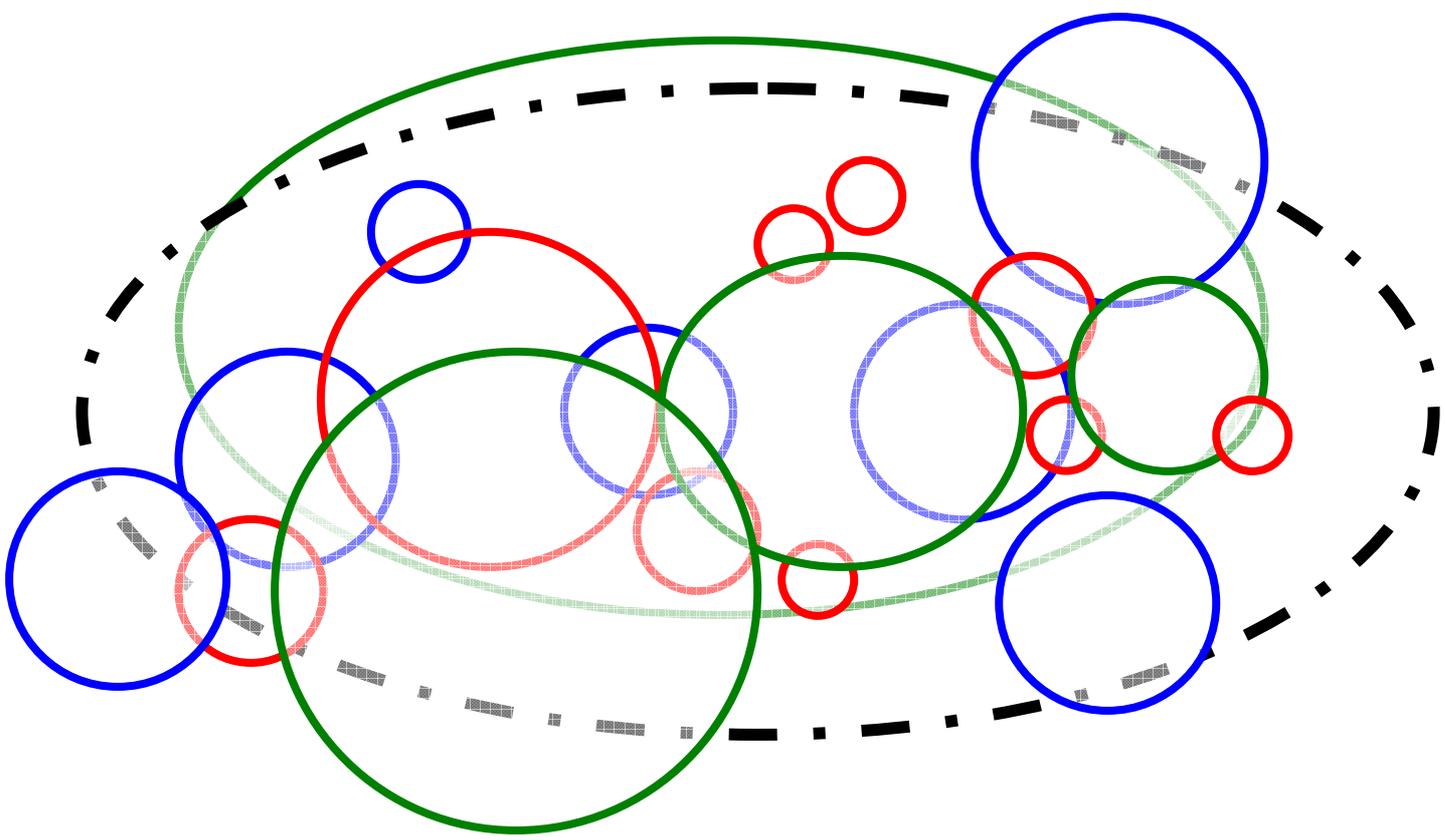
- 2) The Roman Catholic churches in France offer an enormous variety of times for Mass both on Sundays and during the week. Whatever your timetable there will be one at a time to suit. What they don't offer is a variety of worship fare when you get there!

As David Brown says: "Diversity in unity, unity in diversity. Christians must aim at that ideal of the church where everyone is accepted with their differences because they recognise the same Lord and Saviour." ('Passerelles' p. 100).

PORTFOLIO
CHURCH



- WBC 
- Worship 
- Discipleship 
- Ministry 



3. CULTURAL ENGAGEMENT

A Church that wishes to be taken seriously by those around it will need to be engaged with its cultural context. This does not imply that it takes on all the values of its surrounding culture, but that it is aware of and rooted in the culture in which it is placed, rather than shouting at it from a distance. This has been accepted practice for overseas mission for years (and is dealt with supremely in 'Christianity Rediscovered' by Vincent Donovan), but we sometimes forget to apply it nearer home: "Have we made as much effort to contextualise the gospel in France as the missionaries have made for Africa, India or Papua New Guinea?" (David Brown in 'Une eglise pour aujourd'hui' p. 48).

A church that is serious about mission will want to understand the issues and values driving those around it, take them seriously and seek to apply the gospel to them. It will want to get involved in the lives of those around, sharing their joys and sorrows. It will try to answer the questions they are asking, while also provoking new questions emanating from a gospel perspective. It will look for ways to embody the gospel in appropriate cultural clothes: "For wherever the gospel is planted, the texture and make-up of the soil, the climate and the landscape will affect its growth" (Stephen Platten - 'Pilgrims' p. 124)

Examples

1. Urban Expression is involved in creative church planting in the inner city, mainly in the East End of London. It invites those joining it to:
 - ❖ Move in and get involved in the local community
 - ❖ Build relationships and listen carefully to the community
 - ❖ Discover what God is already doing there
 - ❖ Learn from other Christians in the area
2. St. Mark's Haydock, a large Anglican Church with a strong investment in cell church, is reducing the number of its Sunday services from four to two (which means they won't be able to get everyone in!) and encouraging members of cell clusters to come up with ways of engaging with the community as their Sunday worship. They describe this venture as "A coming together of God's people, outside of the normal church structures, with the sole purpose of being the Church in mission, doing church in new ways for a new generation". Examples of cluster activities include Parenting Cluster, Prayer Cluster, TANGO (Community Project) Cluster, Walking Club Cluster, Family Communion Cluster, Community Care Cluster and Clusters with concerns for particular areas of the Parish.

4. BUILD LONG BRIDGES

It is now generally accepted that, for most people, the journey to living faith is long and slow. John Finney's research confirmed this, with the average 'journey time' being about four years ('Finding Faith Today' p.25). This means that we should not expect people to jump straight into the worshipping life of the Church, as we often so unrealistically do. Instead we need to build long bridges for people to walk over - bridges to faith, that is, not necessarily bridges to Church as it is currently expressed. For many people the Christian faith is a big unknown and the Christian Church a relic from the past, at best irrelevant, at worst sinister (see the research project 'Beyond Belief?' conducted by Nick Spencer for the London Institute for Contemporary Christianity for some eye-opening responses!). We have to overcome ingrained prejudices, some solely picked up from the media and cultural presuppositions, some with a basis in reality. This takes time and a long period of exposure to a positive experience of the Christian community. "In fact, today, people are so far from our way of thinking that they need a whole process of journeying to understand the Good News" (David Brown 'Une eglise pour aujourd'hui' p. 92). "Their head is already filled with a whole philosophy of life ... often it is a jumble of more or less disparate elements collected over the years at random from reading, conversations and television programmes." ('Passerelles' same author p. 19).

Churches that are serious about mission will, therefore, try and establish a series of stepping stones that allow this long process from initial contact to committed discipleship to take place. They will create forums that allow for questions and free discussion and allow a blurring of boundaries to enable people to belong while they decide whether to believe. Several Church leaders told me that even joining an Alpha Course is too big an initial step for many people and that they encourage their members to bring friends to social or arts events over a period of time to get to know the church people and raise an interest before inviting them on Alpha or similar courses. Hopefully they will like what they see and want to go further. "People want to journey towards faith in the context of a church. They want to see if, for us, all that is authentic. They are converted first to the church before being converted to Jesus Christ. It may not be good theology, but I have noticed several people becoming integrated into the church on the sociological plane before being converted" (David Brown 'Une eglise pour aujourd'hui' p.101).

This also means we need to be patient and have the grace to allow people to go at their own pace - and even decide not to continue. Some will make the journey, though it may be only a percentage. As someone once said: "It's a bit like cooking spinach - you start with a lot and end up with only a little." Or to quote one church leader working in France: "Small victories count in France." So, we need to be realistic in our expectations and willing to persist in the face of modest results. "Only longer term investment by persevering dedicated groups will see the continuity and development of local ministry that can reasonably expect to see some ground broken up, some relationships lovingly tilled and some seeds of the good news in Jesus sown into human lives - with the consequence of some responding to him and joining a local expression of the Jesus community." (George Lings - 'Encounters on the Edge' no. 18 - 'Stepping Stones' p. 23).

Examples

- 1) 'The Net' in Huddersfield holds invitational events for members to bring their friends every two months. At one such recent event the Christian magician and comedian John Archer came. 130 people were present of whom it is estimated 40 were Church members and 90 from outside. This was followed shortly afterwards by a Church Funday. Friends who express an interest in going further are then invited to join a 'Just Looking group'.
- 2) Howard Moore and Charles Cross are American missionaries working in France with the Greater Europe Mission. Charles is working with a group of Protestant churches in the Oise region of France near Paris trying to encourage joint activity in mission. Howard's team in Lille recently held an Irish evening as a bridge-building event with an Irish band, some of whose members gave testimonies about their Christian faith in the course of the evening. They see evenings like this as an important step in overcoming the great suspicion in which non-catholic churches are held in France.

Let Mike Riddell have the last word this time. He talks about a form of Church that is 'open at the edges, committed at the core': "The philosophy behind this structure is based on the power of attraction rather than compulsion. If Christian life is even partially what is claimed of it, then the hope is that it will have a magnetic power to it. The quality of life and community displayed by the core disciples is intended to draw those who look in from the edges." ('Threshold of the Future' p. 150, 151).

5. USING THE ARTS

A number of the churches that I came across, both in this country and in France, were using the arts in evangelism. I came across examples of drama, painting, music, film, mime, magic, clowning, cartoons and story telling. The common thread seems to be that the arts are effective in today's world because their approach is oblique rather than confrontational. Post-modern man does not take kindly to being told that his views are wrong and he needs to change. There is a great suspicion of truth-claims. However the arts work by opening us up so that we can come to a new understanding for ourselves. They get behind our defences and allow the good news of God's love to creep in on us unawares (The prophet Nathan's use of story to reach King David in 2 Samuel 12 is a good example). "The quality of the aesthetic penetrates our soul through the imagination and touches our reason since art makes ideas plausible" (David Brown 'Une eglise pour aujourd'hui'). "The exploration of an embodied spirituality through the arts will be intrinsic...[to new approaches to mission]" (John Drane 'The Macdonaldization of the Church' p. 181). "The Church of the new millennium will develop the use of the arts in its worship, celebration, participation and communication" (Rob Frost 'Which way for the Church?' p. 133). Rob Frost's interactive nurture course 'Essence' is a good example. It describes itself as "An exploration of contemporary spirituality which looks towards a lifestyle integrating body, mind and spirit" and uses a variety of creative and imaginative processes to help participants explore the Christian story.

Use of the arts obviously goes well with the ideas of building long bridges and providing bridge events to which Christians can bring their friends. On the whole people are willing to come to (culturally appropriate!) arts events who might not be willing to go to Church or to an overtly evangelistic event.

Examples

1. "Mimose Art" (pronounced 'Mimosa') is a Christian Mime duo based in Aix-en-Provence in the south of France. They are involved in clowning, mime and theatre workshops, training and presentation nationally and internationally. Because of the indirect nature of their work, they find that there are openings for them in the secular world, even though they are coming from a Christian perspective. They have found that mime and theatre have great possibilities in evangelism because they allow people to open up and let blockages from the past be opened to God's healing. Roger Chas, one half of Mimose Art with Linda Crossley, described to me how one lady with a long history of being told she was no good at anything was spectacularly healed through a mime workshop.
2. Steve Thrall, an American missionary working in the Paris area and very involved with the arts, told me of a friend who is a professional cartoonist who has prepared a cartoon film series for children based on Christian values 'without being preachy'. At the time we met the friend was involved in serious discussions with a major French television company with a view to the films being shown on French national television.

B) WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR STRUCTURE?

6. STRUCTURE TO FOLLOW PEOPLE

So far I have not really touched on questions of Church structure, merely set out some principles that have emerged from my investigations. It was important to start with the principles and then see what they imply for structure. And indeed that is the key point - **the structure must follow the people, not the people be squeezed into the structure**. Too often we have tried to do the reverse, as any Vicar who has tried to recruit Deanery Synod representatives can vouch! The Church is the response to the action of God in Christ, not its cause. God acted and there the Church came into being - see the account of Peter and John in Samaria in Acts Ch.8 and the story of Cornelius in Acts Ch.10. And the Church exists not for its own sake, but to be a sign of the kingdom for the world. If relationships are the key to mission, then the structures that we create must be those that release and empower people to develop those relationships. Two related images that I came across were those of bean poles (Interview with Chris Neal), where the structure exists only to support the natural growth of the beans and that of a clematis, which likewise needs a supporting structure to grow along (Graham Tomlin - 'The Provocative Church' p. 147-8).

We need to look at where God is at work and develop structures to support that. Too often the structures are tied to where God was once at work years, if not centuries, ago, yet we are still trying against all the odds to maintain them. "The genius of the parish system is that it was a brilliant expression of how to be Church in a non-mobile, hierarchical, feudal society" (Interview with Canon Robert Warren). In today's rapidly changing world we need structures that are lightweight and flexible, structures that liberate not imprison, structures where power, initiative and decision-making are as far as possible dispersed to those on the front line. Church will happen where people are, not where we think they should be - a shift in approach from 'You come to us' to 'We'll come to you' (see Michael Moynagh - 'Changing world, changing church' p. 48). Small groups and cells meeting in homes, cafes, pubs, clubs and schools will have a major part to play. Steve Croft talks about small groups as transforming communities and sees them as holding the key to the Church of the future: "The basic building block of the local Church, alongside the congregation, should be the small group of Christian people who together form a transforming community" ('Transforming Communities' p.71). The story with which he begins his book sets out how he sees that this could happen. It will be necessary to develop local leaders to lead these groups and cells without them having to go through the expensive and cumbersome process of ordination training. It will be important for the minister or 'official' leadership to identify and develop those with leadership gifts and delegate responsibility to them to go where God is leading them. Robert Warren characterises the organisational forms of the future as "light, flexible, shedding; networking rather than institutional; abandoning synodical structures; purposeful meeting; serious engagement with faith and the task in hand; more informal, fluid, energising way of operating" (Interview). The keywords will be 'diversity' and 'untidiness', a 'mixed economy'. "Such a view opens up an untidy, even messy church life, but one which I suspect will be ever more necessary as we seek to grow new forms of Church among the non-churched." (George Lings - Encounters on the Edge 5 - 'Joining the club or changing the rules' p. 11). "Where there are boundaries,

around parishes, dioceses, monastic communities or cathedral closes, they are only appropriately there if they aim to equip all God's people to proclaim a gospel to the whole world" (Stephen Platten, 'Pilgrims' p. 145).

This raises real issues for an established Church such as the Church of England. Traditionally the structure of the Church of England is hierarchical, bureaucratic, centralised and focussed on finances, priests and buildings. What is needed is flexible, lightweight, localised, participative and focussed on people and relationships in the community. The question is: can we adapt? Can we learn to operate less like an old-fashioned multinational (where, for example, decisions about what clothes its representatives may wear are the subject of a debate in its national governing body!) and more like a dynamic missionary enterprise, an "engaging faith community" to quote Robert Warren? Can we learn to promote risk-taking and initiative rather than seeking to impose and control? Can we cope with untidiness? Well, it may be that the exigencies of the current climate will force us to. There are, in fact, a number of signs of such adaptation already taking place, though they are relatively few, often fragile and at the margin. In the coming years, financial considerations are going to force us to look more radically and creatively at how we do things. This will have to include issues such as the deployment of clergy, ordination training, lay training, the parish system, the role of the stipendiary clergy and what we do with our legacy of ancient buildings.

Examples

1. A French secular newspaper article about the continuing decline of traditional catholic religion said: "Thus new eucharistic communities will form around "micropoles": prayer groups, charismatic networks, religious associations, which will attract the faithful of varying geographical origin" (Frederic Lenoir writing in L'Express, quoted by Philippe Jouret in 'Francement', my translation).
2. In Cell churches, such as St. John's Bowling in Bradford and St. Mark's Haydock, it is **the cells** that are seen as **the church**, with the Sunday worship being the coming together of the cells. The cells are the engine of mission, community involvement and evangelism. In St. John's Bowling, a youth project, an old people's project and a young parents' project have all grown out of the cell groups. Cell members are involved in the social and community life of the area and, through their contacts, have been instrumental in bringing a number of people to faith in Christ.
3. The Net Church in Huddersfield is an Anglican network Church without a parish or Church building set up with the full backing of the Diocese of Wakefield. Apparently under the current legislative framework there is no way of recognising its existence - but yet it exists! It seeks to reach out to people in their 20s and 30s who are highly mobile and work through networks of relationships. It has grown from 40 to 100 members in just 4 years.

Let Mike Riddell sum up trenchantly again:

"It is the form of the church in the West which has become the biggest barrier to the gospel. The broad sweep of our ecclesiastical life does not bear witness to the grace, passion, radicality, authority, tenderness, anger, excitement, involvement or acceptance of Jesus. Unfortunately for us, the medium has become the message. The popular image of Christianity is formed by encounter with the church; and so Christianity is regarded as reactionary, oppressive, conservative, moralistic, hypocritical, boring, formal and judgmental"
(*'Threshold of the Future'* p.39).

7. INHERITED OR EMERGING CHURCH?

So, is it possible for the inherited forms of Church to become suitable vehicles for dynamic mission in today's world, or do we need to scrap them and start again from scratch? Pete Ward in his book 'Liquid Church' contrasts what he calls 'Solid Church' with its heavy emphasis on the gathered congregation in the Church building on Sunday morning with 'Liquid Church', which is about networking and communication. "Liquid Church would replace congregation with communication. The networked Church would connect individuals, groups and organisations in a series of flows. Connection would gather around hubs and would be made up of connecting nodes. A hub might be a retreat centre, a sports team, a music group, a record company, a Christian shop and so on. Connection to individuals and groups would involve sharing the life of God in a variety of ways" ('Liquid Church' p. 87). He is very critical of the concern for Sunday attendance numbers, going so far as to suggest that "I have sometimes felt that the real purpose of church services is to enable the clergy to count the congregation"! (p. 18) In his interview with me he said that it is the people who actually come to church who are stopping us engaging in mission in our society. He explained that he is concerned that we allow the 'givens' of existing church structure to drive things too much, and need to put more resources into new starts rather than these givens.

However even Pete Ward does not see Liquid Church sweeping away the existing church, rather a period of evolution where the two exist side by side: "When ice turns to water, for a substantial period it exists as solid and liquid. We should expect to see solid and liquid types of Church develop in response to cultural change.". And he admits that liquid church does not exist yet. The new forms of emerging Church are nothing like sufficient as yet to take the place of inherited forms of Church, even if that were desirable. Chris Neal in my interview with him maintained that the renewal of inherited forms of Church is an essential accompaniment to the development of new emerging forms. "If emerging Church is seen as separate from regular Church, we've lost the game. Right where we are the Church can begin to transform itself into something new. Every local church will need to learn how to explore community and relationships in the local setting." (Chris Neal - Quotation from article in the Church of England Newspaper 20th February 2003). Even Mike Riddell would agree "It is not enough for a few radicals to lead the way, the great mass of the western Church must shift" ('Threshold of the Future' p. 173).

So it seems the answer to 'Inherited or emerging?' is both/and, not either/or - but with the inherited forms learning from the newer forms and adapting to the current climate. "We need *both* to plant new churches that engage creatively with contemporary culture *and* to transform existing churches into contextualised missional congregations. The way forward is to learn together" ('Church planting: Past, Present and Future' by George Lings and Stuart Murray p. 27). And Archbishop Rowan Williams has written: "New ways of living as worshipping communities are springing up all around, and we need the joyful imagination that will allow this new life to flourish around and alongside our traditional church patterns." (Message in the 2003 Review of the Church of England). Stuart Murray Williams talked about a creative partnership between inherited and emerging church with the former resourcing the latter and the latter feeding back ideas and stimuli to the former (Interview). I find Pete Ward's picture of

the melting ice helpful here. Perhaps what we need is a sort of 'Slush-Puppy' Church (for the uninitiated, Slush-Puppy is a children's drink made up of a flavoured slurry of melting ice) - in other words fluid but with solid fragments within the liquid. In fact, for all our fears about 'meltdown', perhaps just what the church needs is to begin to melt or thaw into new, more fluid forms. Hence the title of this paper 'Fondant Church', fondant being the French for 'melting'. Somehow, though, we have got to ensure that the old forms do not strangle the new at birth, or starve them of resources, but allow them to develop alongside. As much as anything it is a change of mindset that is called for, away from thinking that Church really means the Sunday congregation in the Church building to a much wider picture of what Church might look like: "I suggest that that we need to shift from seeing church as a gathering of people meeting in one place at one time - that is, a congregation - to a notion of church as a series of relationships and communications" ('Liquid Church' p.2).

Example

1. The Diocese of Oxford has set aside some of the extra money it was recently allocated by the Church Commissioners for 'cutting edge ministry'. They have set up a 'fighting fund' for a limited number of creative experiments and are letting them run for several years to see what happens.
2. The Roman Catholic Church in France is in many ways a classic example of inherited Church and faces problems far more serious than the Church of England. For example the average age of its Priests is 67 and there are only about 100 ordinations a year for the whole country - very serious for such a sacramentally based Church. However I was told repeatedly that there are, nonetheless, many signs of life and in my short stay I was able to witness some of these. Much of the future hope for the Church seems to lie in networks such as the charismatic 'Chemin Neuf' (New Way) and 'Emmanuel' networks together with some of the monastic communities. The lack of priests has led to enormous lay participation in church life, such as baptism and marriage preparation, leading of much of the liturgy and even funerals. There is a vision for mission within the church. Their Deaneries are called 'Secteurs Missionnaires' ('Missionary Sectors'). I was also told of Roman Catholic priests approaching evangelical and charismatic Protestants for help with Bible Study and setting up Alpha courses. Incidentally the marketing of the Alpha Course in France was deliberately initially targeted at the Catholic Church and, although it is now being picked up within the Protestant sector, there is still some suspicion of it as being a Roman Catholic course!

Mike Riddell again: "Anticipating the future requires supportive and transitional structures for the nascent vision. It is generally not the case that one form of response to life and faith dies and then a new one develops abruptly. For a period the old and the new will exist side by side" (ibid. p.98). The 'mixed economy' again.

8. THE ADVANTAGES OF THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND

This may seem a strange title given the critical things I have said about the Church of England, but spending a month in France has made me aware that there are some advantages in the situation of the Church of England - particularly compared with the Church in France. In France the Church has traditionally been polarised between the great national Church, the Roman Catholic Church, on the one hand and the Protestant churches on the other, with a very painful history between them. The Protestant churches themselves have traditionally been riven by splits and marginalised in French society where people by and large equate 'Christian' and 'Catholic'. They have to work hard to avoid being characterised as sects. The majority of French people have turned their back on the Catholic Church (at least as far as active participation goes), but would not dream of going to a Protestant church. Against this background, the existence of the Church of England, catholic and reformed, and to some extent occupying a bridge position in English Church life, has many positive aspects.

For all its drawbacks, spelt out in the previous section, the Church of England does have strong community links and is still the Church that many people turn to when they need one - and sometimes are pleasantly surprised by what they find! "The Anglican penumbra remains a large one: it is, I would argue, the distinguishing feature of the Church of England compared with other Christian denominations in this country. Latent or nominal Anglicanism persists as the most common form of English religiosity" (Grace Davie in 'Religion in Britain since 1945' p. 56). Cathedral congregations are growing and many people go to them at moments of national crisis. We still have privileged access to many of the nation's schools (unthinkable in the state system in France). We also hold together within one umbrella an enormous variety of traditions and styles of worship and practice, from more-catholic-than-the-catholics to wild charismatics. We may not always agree or get on but, at least so far (!), have managed to hold together in one body. We can (or at least parts of us can) talk happily to almost any other denomination. New forms of church do seem to manage to emerge from within our ranks (albeit nothing like enough).

If we can learn the lessons that this report attempts to set out to identify, I believe there is great potential. The Church of England has historically shown itself able to evolve and adapt - but sadly always much too slowly. Now is the time to take radical steps toward becoming the sort of fluid Church that can speak to our society.

Examples

1. 'The Net'. I visited the Net one Sunday morning. During the course of my visit I asked one member what, for him, were the attractions of the Net. He told me that they were, firstly, that it was a Church geared to reaching the unchurched and, secondly, that it was Anglican, which gave it credibility in society. There was no need to explain what it was as there might be with a less well-known denomination.
2. While in France I met John Wilkinson, the Chaplain of St. Peter's Anglican Chaplaincy Church in Chantilly, just outside Paris. Despite being an Anglophone church primarily for expatriates, it has come to occupy a key position at the centre

of Church life in Chantilly, being able to bring together churches from the town across the catholic/protestant divide. At the time I was there, they were about to hold a Christian Arts Festival involving all the churches of the town, under the heading 'Merci qui?' (Thank who?). St. Peter's had been the prime mover in getting this off the ground.

9. A MODEL FOR TODAY?

Is it possible to come up with a structure for the Church to carry it into the future? Most people I spoke to felt that it was very hard to say what the church might look like in the future, though words like 'messy', 'fuzzy' or 'untidy' did crop up and there was general agreement that it should be 'relational' and 'fluid'. Yet surely we need to have some idea of where we are setting out towards if we are going to know in which direction to go. Of course, the vision of the future will of necessity be partial and provisional, but it will still give a sense of general direction. Let me put forward an outline.

To recap what we have said so far, the structure will need to be one that is flexible and lightweight, that supports and encourages relationships in the community and engagement with the cultural context, that promotes the use of the arts and the building of long bridges to faith and allows for diversity within unity. It will be one that allows inherited forms of church to coexist with emerging forms in a creative partnership and gives freedom to new forms of Church to develop and reproduce. Any such structure is inevitably going to be a bit loose and untidy, but yet must have sufficient solidity for there to be coherence and a sense of belonging to one body (the 'melting ice' picture - though I have in mind a steady state of liquid and ice coexisting, rather than a complete eventual melting).

In the model that I propose, I am thinking primarily of the Church of England, but it might well transfer to other denominations, or even across denominations.

I have in mind a Church structure where there are localised centres of mission providing support, encouragement and 'relational glue' to a variety of different expressions of Church, some of which might be recognisable as traditional churches with their own building, many of which would not. (I will, for convenience, refer to these various expressions of church as 'encounters'. I have in mind what Archbishop Rowan Williams calls "the community that happens when people meet the living Christ".) The centres of mission would also have the task of looking for and developing new mission encounters. In the Anglican context there might be say two or three such centres of mission in the area currently covered by a Deanery, maybe based at existing parishes, but maybe simply a group of church leaders meeting regularly. The centres of mission would have general oversight of the encounters, but would as far as possible allow the local leadership of those encounters to take responsibility for them and develop and reproduce them, providing help and support where appropriate. The encounters might take the form of cells, housegroups, groups meeting in pubs, clubs and schools, sports teams, arts groups, as well as more traditional forms of church. Not all would be geographically based. Between them, they would provide opportunities for worship, learning and growing, mission and evangelism, community, and service, though not all would provide each of these and members would to some extent have to decide how they took part in each of these (Portfolio Church?) In an Anglican context the stipendiary clergy would probably be focussed on the centres of mission, with the leadership of the encounters being a mixture of Non-Stipendiary Ministers, Ordained Local Ministers, Readers and lay people with appropriate training and experience, freeing up the stipendiary clergy for their oversight role. "To try to fit stipendiary

clergy into a purely 'local' slot may not be the best use of resources available to us. They should be a precious resource whose deployment is strategic. More and more they will be seen as ministers of oversight: discerning gifts, facilitating training of all kinds, relating local Christian communities to the wider Church" (Michael Nazir-Ali 'Shapes of the Church to come' p. 140).

Perhaps what I have called 'centres of mission' and 'encounters' bear some resemblance to what Pete Ward calls 'hubs' and 'nodes'. Rob Frost uses the interesting expression of a 'village' to describe the Church ("churches will be villages that are the focus of deep belonging. They will recognise that the world isn't looking for an organisation to join but a community to be part of." - 'Which way for the Church?' p. 129) and this certainly has something of what I am trying to get at. A village has centres of community (the pub, the church, the shop or post office etc.), but yet much of the community life happens in informal and unstructured ways outside these centres, yet there is undeniably a real sense of overall community held together to some extent by the village centres.

Another model I hear increasingly referred to is the Minster model and in many ways what I propose is a version of this, though I would be anxious not to see the term Minster identified too closely with a building. To my view church buildings will play only a secondary role in the church of the future. But the Minster model does embody the principle of a centre of mission with a team of people given responsibility for promoting mission within its surrounding area.

To develop a structure such as I propose will require a two-pronged attack. At the current parish church level it requires the development of local ministry teams who will take responsibility for the development of local mission encounters. These teams must be allowed real power to take initiatives and have real responsibility for those encounters with which they are charged, which will include most existing church activities. They must also be taught and encouraged about the importance of relationships, cultural engagement and building long bridges. The second prong is at Diocesan and Deanery level to look strategically at what is going on in an area and see what groupings or clusters can appropriately be brought together and where centres of mission might be established. However this clustering will achieve nothing without the work at local leadership level, or we will end up simply perpetuating existing ways of doing things and introduce additional stress and fresh tensions, especially for the clergy.

To pursue this line will also have major implications for the role of the stipendiary clergy, some of whom will move to a more episcopal and less directly hands-on role, while others with different gifts might perform the more apostolic role of pioneers and entrepreneurs establishing and developing new forms of Church. "For the laity to become more 'priestly', it is therefore necessary for the clergy to become more episcopal" (Derby Diocese Ministry Strategy Document quoted in the ABM Report 'Shaping Ministry for a Missionary Church' p. 8). Clergy will need much support and some retraining if it is to be effective. But far better to do this in a planned and controlled manner than simply giving clergy more and more churches to look after, expecting them to carry on ministering in the traditional way, with consequent stress

and sense of failure. And Theological Colleges and training courses will need to look carefully at what models of ministry are implicit in their training programmes.

Imaginary example

(Note: This is just one possible example, not a model to be followed!)

In the medium-sized town of Cityville, covered by one Anglican Deanery, four Centres of Mission are established.

One is based on the Cathedral in the centre of the City and has responsibility for Diocesan, civic and city-wide affairs, and for co-ordinating ecumenical relationships within the Diocese and City. It has a sister Church with a strong tradition for good liturgical worship. It also has a creative arts team who are available to advise and perform anywhere in the City.

One is based on a grouping of four parishes on one side of the City. The Centre of Mission is a weekly meeting of the leadership of those parishes - one stipendiary Vicar, four Ordained Local Ministers (OLM), one from each Parish, and an Administrator. Each of the parishes has a local shared ministry team, including the OLM. Within the four parishes are a variety of groups and activities, traditional and innovative, all with their own local leadership. Some are organised jointly for all four parishes, for example Alpha Courses and the 11-14 Youth Group. The OLMs are responsible for regular worship, baptisms, weddings and funerals within their own Parish and for ensuring pastoral care - though this mostly takes place through the networks of small groups and activities. The stipendiary Vicar is responsible for overall oversight, chairing the weekly meeting of the Centre of Mission and supporting and encouraging the local shared ministry teams of the four parishes. He also helps out as required in the parishes, for example to provide cover for holidays and illness. He preaches periodically in each Church, sharing something of the central vision of the Mission Centre (and teaching about relationships and bridge-building!). And he is a member of the Diocesan Mission Team who support and advise other Centres of Mission and look out for new developments in mission. The four churches between them offer a wide variety of times and styles of worship, some on a Sunday, others on other days. There is just one evening service - a reflective, creative service held in one of the churches, but attended by people from all four. There are also regular social events held for all four parishes together, at which members of the creative arts team at the Cathedral often perform. There are a number of Cell groups, not necessarily tied to a particular parish, all actively involved in evangelism. One of the cells has recently started a monthly film night when they go out to the local cinema with friends and then discuss the implications of the film for life and faith in the burger bar across the road afterwards. Otherwise there are relatively few official Church meetings and members are encouraged to meet informally and get involved in social activities in the community. Groups of members and their non-Christian friends go out periodically for meals or to the cinema or theatre together.

The third Centre of Mission is based around a Community Project in a large area of Council estate on the other side of the City. There were once three parish churches in this area, but they have now been closed and worship takes place in the Community Centre on the estate and in the local schools on weekday afternoons after school. The latter are usually led entirely by lay people, including parents, though there are periodic communions led by one of the clergy. Local members of the Methodists and United Reformed Church join in both forms of worship. Their own local

churches closed some years ago. There are a number of cell groups, but they are all involved in some aspect of work in the community - parent/toddler group cell, single-parent support cell, OAP lunches cell, detached youth work cell etc. The staff consists of one stipendiary Vicar, one OLM, a Community Worker and an Administrator. They meet regularly with the cell group leaders. There are relatively few baptisms or weddings and funerals are shared between the Vicar and the OLM, with the OLM taking the lion's share. Baptisms often take place within the context of the parent/toddler group. There are regular men's nights held in the local working men's club, sometimes with a quiz, sometimes with a Christian speaker and sometimes with a band. The new 'START' nurture course is held in the club from time to time. Church members and staff are often to be found around the Community Centre during the day and many relationships are forged over a cup of tea in the café area.

The fourth centre of mission is an exploration of how to build church among young people involved in the night-club scene in the city centre. A team of young people from various churches in the city, headed by a stipendiary minister, visit the clubs regularly and are available for club guests to talk to. They have many fruitful contacts, especially as they are getting to be known and trusted. They meet before the clubs get going in a café in the town and invite contacts to join them there for coffee and a chat. Once a week they meet for a time of prayer and informal worship. It is early days yet and how the church will develop is not yet clear. The centre has its own support group to which it is accountable. Members of the support group include a Diocesan representative and the Stipendiary Vicar from the first centre for mission.

CONCLUSION

Mike Riddell writes in 'Threshold of the Future': "Today the Western church stands poised at the fringes of radically new terrain ... The call of God is upon the Western church to take courage and move forward." "The current situation is indeed dire, and continuation along existing paths may well result in practical non-existence. But the recognition of impending calamity may just function as a wake-up call for us. If so, then a comprehensive reform of the Western churches is called for." (pp. 15, 93)

I hope we hear that wake-up call. But I do not believe that ensuring the continued existence of the Church should be our main motivator for change (though it does focus minds!). I believe that the changes I have identified are right in themselves because of the call of the gospel to love and reach out to everyone. There are many ways of doing things that have crept into the church over the centuries that do not really spring from the gospel. Robert Warren, when I asked for his vision for the future, talked about getting back to first principles, about faith as the knowledge of God, about that faith shared in a community, about the incarnation as deep and compassionate engagement in the world around. There are too many things that happen in the life of our churches that are about none of these things. And there are aspects of our church life that actively work against them. This is unacceptable in principle and unsustainable in practice.

The Church, as Chris Neal put it to me, is like an ocean-going tanker, very slow to turn around, and change is not going to come overnight. There may well be a continued decline over the next few years whatever we do. However there are clear signs that where change has happened, it has made a real difference. There are enough signs of life around to show clearly that there are plenty of grounds for hope if we are willing to take the first steps towards the necessary change. And I am very encouraged that we have an Archbishop of Canterbury who clearly sees this. I pray that at all levels of the Church we will respond to this challenge.

Let me give the very last word to Vincent Donovan, who realised all this many years ago. He writes, in words similar to those of the Archbishop of Canterbury with which I began this report:

"When the gospel reaches a people where they are, their response to that gospel is the church in a new place, and the song they will sing is that new, unsung song, that unwritten melody that haunts all of us"

(*'Christianity Rediscovered'* Preface to second edition p. vii)

APPENDIX 1 - INTERVIEWEES

1. IN THE UK

John Holmes	Canon Missioner Wakefield Diocese
George Lings	The Church Army Sheffield Centre
Kevin Popely	Together in Mission/ Goldhill Baptist Church
Pete Ward	Lecturer at King's College London, author of 'Liquid Church'
Chris Neal	Director of Mission Movement, Church Mission Society, former Rector of Thame
Rupert Martin	Vicar, St. Helen's, Sandal Magna, Wakefield
Dave Male	Vicar 'The Net', Huddersfield
Tony Mullen	Anglican Cell Church Network/ St. Mark's Haydock
Glen Marshall	Pastor Wakefield Baptist Church
Stuart Murray-Williams	Author and speaker on Church planting and new forms of Church
Howard Astin	Vicar St. John's Bowling (Cell church)
Robert Warren	Springboard
Peter Farley	British Director, France-Mission
John Harris	Vicar, Christchurch, South Ossett
Stephen Mawditt	Asst. Minister, The Fountain of Life Church, Norwich Diocese

2. IN FRANCE

David Brown	Church Planter with France-Mission, author
Terry Smith	Canadian Baptist Ministries
John Wilkinson	Chaplain, St. Peter's Anglican Chaplaincy, Chantilly
Charles Cross	Greater Europe Mission (US)
Howard Moore	Greater Europe Mission (US)
Andre Pownall	Institut Biblique de Nogent
Steve Thrall	TEAMS Mission (US)
Augustin Nkundubashaka	Fraternite Evangelique Afrique-Europe
Andy Griffiths	Assistant Chaplain St. Michael's Paris
Jacques Weiner	Pasteur 'Le Chemin'
Frederic Baudin	Alliance Evangelique d'Aix-en-Provence
Janice Duffin	Coordinatrice Alpha for 'Le Chemin'
Charles Kouyoumdjian	Director 'L'Eau Vive' Christian Conference Centre
Henry Deneen	S.I.T.E., member 'Le Chemin'
Dave Coates	Ancien (Elder) - Le Chemin
Pat Berning	Ancien (Elder) - Le Chemin
Roger Chas/Linda Crossley	'Mimose Art'
Stephan Lauzet	Alliance Evangelique de France
Jacques et Francette Caire	Mission representatives 'Le Chemin'

My thanks to all those who kindly gave me their time, and especially to Dave Coates and Terry Smith who organised my meetings in Aix-en-Provence and Paris respectively. I hope I have not misrepresented anyone's views in this report. If I have please let me know! And the responsibility is all my own. I'm sorry space did not permit me to quote everyone I met. Each meeting gave me something fresh to think about.

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