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PETER WILLIAMS

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# 'Pragmatic, comfortable and unobtrusive'<sup>1</sup>: Can the Church of England ever learn to evangelise?

**In this article, Peter Williams reminds us that the Church of England is in serious decline and that the contemporary challenge is to evangelise or die. Despite recovering from a comparably dangerous position in the early nineteenth century, through spiritual renewal and structural changes, in the second half of the twentieth century it reversed the progress. He argues it now has to overcome four inhibitors to evangelism arising from its heritage and, as it seeks to develop new strategies for evangelism, highlights eleven missiological principles from the past and from the story of contemporary success in other parts of the world. To put this into practice he presents the case that evangelism should be episcopally facilitated but without tight episcopal and institutional controls because churches need to have the freedom to get on with their own visions in their distinctive cultural settings. A key question therefore is whether the institutional bureaucracy of the Church of England can allow evangelism to be central to its culture without centralising (and thus destroying) its direction, energy and purpose.**

## The problem

The evidence is overwhelming. The traditional denominations in the United Kingdom are in rapid decline. While a largish number of people in the UK self-describe themselves as Christian<sup>2</sup> it is clear that this vicarious religion has virtually no consequence in terms of active allegiance to the Church of England. Peter Brierley demonstrates that the churches have been declining by about one percent a year since 1990. He expected this decline to increase to 1.7% between 2005 and 2010.<sup>3</sup>

The Church of England was no exception. While its latest statistics – only a 1% decline between 2003 and 2007 in average weekly attendance – do make it clear that Brierley's forecasts were over pessimistic – this is as yet small comfort when put, for example, beside the horrific 4% decline in children and young people's attendance in a single recent year (2006-7).<sup>4</sup> The Church of England is also weighed

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1 Paxman 1999: 98.

2 See [www.statistics.gov.uk/cpi/nugget.asp?id=293](http://www.statistics.gov.uk/cpi/nugget.asp?id=293) ('Religion in the UK: Census shows 72% identify as Christians').

3 Brierley and Miles 2005: para 2.23.

4 Bowder 2009 (at [www.churchtimes.co.uk/content.asp?id=70816](http://www.churchtimes.co.uk/content.asp?id=70816)). See report from Research and Statistics Archbishops' Council, online at [www.cofe.anglican.org/info/statistics/2007provisionalattendance.pdf](http://www.cofe.anglican.org/info/statistics/2007provisionalattendance.pdf)

down by its historic heritage of churches and this problem becomes ever worse as numbers decline. It cannot just off-load churches of architectural merit. It will be spending £16 million per annum by 2040 on supporting redundant churches – and that at 2002 prices.<sup>5</sup>

There has been in the past large scale official denial about this reality. Comfort has been taken from the fact that 25 million people living in England are baptised<sup>6</sup> and that a much larger number than go to church regularly are on Electoral Rolls and thus in some sense members. But, as Gill damningly observes, while ‘looser forms of belonging’ are to be welcomed ‘when they are stages towards regular worship’, they should be distrusted ‘when they become paths away from worship’.<sup>7</sup> Further solace has been taken from the assertion that, whatever happens, God will never desert his Church. That is a universal truth but it is not a particular truth. While it is a glorious certainty that God will stand by His Church universal, it is a demonstrable fact that local churches wax and wane. The land that produced Augustine and an enormously powerful and influential church in North Africa now counts committed Christian adherents in hundreds if not tens. There is therefore absolutely no biblical or historical reason to expect that the Church of England has some sort of divine immunity from that fate visited upon other churches in the past. This was brought sometimes by compromise of gospel belief, sometimes by sad failures to grasp missiological imperatives and sometimes by a loss of any sense of calling to a distinctive life-style.

Denial is no starting place for strategic vision. Twenty-nine years ago, external partners of the Church of England produced a highly critical report – *To a Rebellious House? ‘A clear vision’*, it concluded of the Church of England, ‘seems to be absent’.<sup>8</sup> In 2005 that most admirable report *Resourcing mission within the Church of England* spoke of ‘the absence of a strategic approach to develop the church’s missionary emphasis’. Without it, it continued, any ‘adjustments to its resources’ will have little impact. Indeed ‘they may represent just another means of managing decline’.<sup>9</sup> It challenged the frequent assumption that some tweaking at the edges is all that is necessary. It was ‘not enough for the Church merely to encourage some new models of church at the margins of its activity’. The situation was too serious and urgent ‘to tinker at the edges’. Rather there was the need for ‘a wider plan to mobilise the Church of England for mission’.<sup>10</sup>

## Nineteenth-century success

Encouragement is sometimes taken from the fact that the church has recovered from comparably bad positions. ‘The Church, as it now stands’, judged Thomas Arnold in an oft-quoted remark, ‘no human power can save’.<sup>11</sup> That Arnold was proved to be wrong was because the Church did not continue to stand as it stood when he made the assessment in 1832. It was changed by two crucial factors.

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5 Brierley and Miles 2005: para 12.12.

6 Gill 2003: 100.

7 Gill 2003: 101.

8 Church of England General Synod. 1981: para 72.

9 Church of England General Synod. 2005: para 6.2. Online link to report and annexes at [www.cofe.anglican.org/about/gensynod/agendas/july05.html](http://www.cofe.anglican.org/about/gensynod/agendas/july05.html)

10 Church of England General Synod. 2005: para 4.2.

11 Stanley 1880 [1844]: I, 278.

*First*, there was a spiritual revival issuing in a new concern for evangelism, a new love for those most in need, new methodologies and strategies and a new devotion. It started with the Evangelical Revival which flowed into the Oxford Movement. What both movements were capable of doing was drawing on the Christian heritage in a way that inspired belief and commitment and changed the way people lived. They asked the right questions that identified the challenges they faced and they set about addressing them, together generating a colossal energy:

- 'Is there a social need? We will start a great campaign to address it'.
- 'Are we deficient in our knowledge of the early church or of the Reformation? We will embark on a vast academic and publishing exercise to make the key texts available'.
- 'Are the universities failing to give the right sort of training for ordination? We will establish our own theological colleges'.
- 'Is the gospel not being proclaimed properly in India or Africa, or central London, or to destitutes, prostitutes, orphans, chimney-sweeps or gentlewomen who have fallen on hard times? We will establish societies to raise money, to recruit and train workers, to engage with the problem wherever it might be'.
- 'Are our great new industrial centres without sufficient churches? We will commit ourselves to finding the resources and providing what is necessary'.

No need or challenge seemed too great for them – whether social or spiritual or evangelistic; whether for more church buildings or more missionaries – their personal, spiritual and organisational energies drove them on until it was achieved. Their spiritual convictions both transformed them and gave them a vision of society being transformed. They helped to create a culture in which reaching out to the needs of the world was centrally important.

It was against this backdrop that the *second* major factor emerged. That was the drive towards structural and institutional reform. The impetus for this came from two far-sighted people – the Prime Minister, Sir Robert Peel, and the Bishop of London, Charles Blomfield. As a result of their structural reforms, parishes were able to be divided and over 3,000 new churches were built between 1831 and 1875.<sup>12</sup> New dioceses were established. The consequence of all this was enormous growth in the Church of England. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, few intelligent people would have thought that it would have survived. By the end of the nineteenth century the question of its survival had fallen off the agenda. It was by then quite difficult to think of England without the Church of England playing some significant part. But there were weaknesses that would become more apparent in a different age. The Church of England, particularly in its ministerial structures, remained inexorably middle-class. If it recruited working-class ordinands, as it did, its newly created theological colleges, based on the Oxbridge model, quickly socialized them, while imparting new professional expectations of the office of the priest. The result was a deep divide. The working-classes came, if they did, out of deference. 'We comes to church in the morning to please you, Sir', said a Skegness parishioner to his vicar Edward Steere, 'and goes to chapel at night to save our souls.'<sup>13</sup> Though there were significant exceptions, ministers in

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12 Gilbert 1976: 130.

13 Obelkevich 1976: 157.

working class areas often felt, in Hugh McLeod's words, 'isolated by the suspicion of the natives and by the differences in language and custom that made the life of the local population repugnant to them.'<sup>14</sup> There was another baneful consequence springing this time from the newly acquired professional standards of the clergy and their desire to see the ideals they had come to regard as obligatory to their calling practised in their parishes. In their path, to take one of the most dramatic examples, lay the haphazard independence of the gloriously unprofessional, unapologetically male, fiercely proud and deeply culturally entrenched world of church bands so affectionately and movingly described by George Eliot and Thomas Hardy. The bands however could not long withstand the more refined, middle-class sensibilities of college-trained clergy. These modern clergy preferred 'organ-music to any other'.<sup>15</sup> It was cultural imperialism just as insensitive as any imposed by missionaries in 'darkest Africa'. And with very baneful consequences. For in came organs and in came choirs. *And out went men*. '[F]or the first time in their lives', Hardy observed of the male musicians in church after their displacement, 'they all felt awkward, out of place, abashed, and inconvenienced by their hands'.<sup>16</sup> And that tragic cultural displacement was permanent. Men have not returned. The balance shifted for the clergy 'decisively away from their congregations to themselves. Whatever the wishes of the villagers, Anglican services became more dignified, more feminine and more clerical.'<sup>17</sup> And, as they did so, they created a special Anglican worship ambience – grand, beautiful and reverent perhaps – but ever more remote from ordinary people, particularly men.

## Twentieth-century failure

If the nineteenth century saw the Church of England rising from its anticipated demise, the twentieth century saw it falling into an unexpected demise. By the end of that century, all of its statistics pointed downwards. The Church was increasingly ignored in public life. There were few signs of a compelling dynamic innovative vision gripping its members.

The earlier part of the twentieth century saw enormous disputes, particularly over suggested reforms relating to liturgy. This made the divide between the groups which make up the Church of England grow greater. The evangelicals emphasized biblical authority and looked to the Reformation for their inspiration. The Catholics emphasized the Church and looked to the early church and Catholic practices through the ages for their inspiration. The liberals emphasized the role of the mind and looked to the inspirational figures of current culture to help them define the questions with which faith should be wrestling. There was a rather large further group which did not want to identify itself precisely with any of these three groups but which looked for something not easily defined but sometimes called 'Anglicanism' for its inspiration.

One great Archbishop, William Temple, gave a lead particularly in the areas of social engagement and was one of the major architects of the Welfare State. Through this period, the Church of England was able to continue to live off the gains of the Victorian period. If anything, its apparent strength was enhanced by the upturn in church attendance which characterized the post Second World War

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<sup>14</sup> McLeod 1974: 104.

<sup>15</sup> Hardy 1994 [1872]: 93.

<sup>16</sup> Hardy 1994 [1872]: 187.

<sup>17</sup> Obelkevich 1976: 150.

period, especially the fifties. It was, to take another example, still the desirable norm in mid-century for children to be baptized and, if they were middle class, to be confirmed.

All this was blown apart by the sixties. They brought unparalleled questions in all areas. In the Church of England, this was most dramatically seen in John Robinson's *Honest to God*. Its significance was that it was from a bishop who appeared to be casting doubt on central Christian doctrines. That had happened in the past but without so much controversy. This book had a particular popularity because it resonated with the period in which the dam marked 'authority' 'order' and 'deference' had been breached. As it so happened, the Church of England was coming to the end of a period of catholic leadership with Archbishop Michael Ramsey at Canterbury. He attempted to deal with the problem – not very successfully. Within a few decades the liberals were in most of the dominant positions. Robert Runcie, who became Archbishop in 1979, recalls Hugh Montefiore commenting to him at the time, 'My God, John Robinson's written a book which is going to cause mayhem – he's going to tell the world the sort of thing *we* believe.'<sup>18</sup> Runcie well-represented the urbane liberalism that became ever more dominant. There was, recalls one of his chaplains, 'no obvious piety to him' though he did have 'an unquestioned seriousness' and three times in his final moving TV interview with his son 'he referred to something outside himself influencing the sort of person he was going to be.'<sup>19</sup> Such underplayed faith was scarcely the sort of strong vision and commitment that was going to inspire and draw many people to faith in the late twentieth century. And it didn't. It is not surprising that the Church of England began increasingly to weaken through that period. It was regarded with increasing derision. 'The official religion of Britain is as harmless as our national drink, the cup of tea,' declared the hard-bitten but very perceptive newspaper columnist, Peter Jenkins.<sup>20</sup> 'In our area', the clergyman in David Hare's *Racing Demon* comments, 'I wouldn't even say the Church was a joke. It's an irrelevance. It has no connection with people's lives.' Another character in the play asserts that the Church of England is based on 'a massive failure of nerve. You've become enlightened humanists.'<sup>21</sup> The Church of England by the early twenty-first century was perceived by many to be so weak and inconsequential that Roy Hattersley was compelled to urge his *Guardian* readers to resist the 'temptation, felt particularly strongly by readers of a paper such as this, to regard the established church as a dragon that is not worth slaying.'<sup>22</sup> The late twentieth century also saw further weakening because of deep inroads to its substantial historic resources (£4.4 billion in 2003 prices) caused by disastrous property speculations. This lowered the Church of England's own self-confidence and meant that a much greater financial burden was put on the laity. This may be to its long-term benefit but it was a further serious blow, particularly to the viability of the parish system.<sup>23</sup> There were other far reaching changes. General Synod was established in 1970. It was, in Hastings words, 'a triumph of self-government, of centralized self-government'.<sup>24</sup> Patterns of worship changed with the new *Alternative Service Book* (1980) followed by *Common Worship* (2000) allowing 'individual churches to tailor

18 Carpenter 1996: 159.

19 Platten 2002: 16.

20 Jenkins 1988.

21 Quoted in Paxman 1999: 107.

22 Hattersley 2005, online at [www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2005/nov/21/monarchy.religion](http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2005/nov/21/monarchy.religion).

23 Carr 1998: 30, 36.

24 Hastings 1986: 608.

their services to their own setting and culture and the needs of their particular congregations'<sup>25</sup>. In 1994 came the ordination of women as priests. All these changes promised some sort of breakthrough in evangelism. None of them, however necessary, delivered. Indeed there was a sense in which they were, in Archbishop Carey's words, speaking particularly of the ordination of women and the financial problems of the Church Commissioners, 'major distractions' from the focus of the Decade of Evangelism. The Decade was, as he acknowledged at the end of his archiepiscopate, 'a great disappointment – knocked off course by those familiar old basics: sex and money'.<sup>26</sup>

## **An unhelpful heritage: Four inhibitors to evangelism**

If then the history of the Church of England teaches anything about recovery from impending disaster it is the need for spiritual revival and structural change to go hand-in-hand. And there have been considerable structural changes in the recent past. There are signs of renewed spiritual vitality within the Church of England. The 'feel' of the Church of England overall is that it is a more spiritually engaged body than it was fifty or so years ago. It is certainly more evangelistically-focused and discipleship-orientated with the enormous success of Alpha and the emulators it has spawned such as Christianity Explored and Emmaus.

Yet there are many inhibitors to evangelism.

### **The psychological grip of establishment**

The *first* inhibitor to notes is *the psychological grip of establishment* – the product of a certain not uncommon perception of what being an Anglican means. The established Church, Matthew Parris contends, understands 'in her bones two great truths: the English are wary about religion; but the English do not want to be atheists. To the English mind, atheism itself carries an unpleasant whiff of enthusiasm. To the English mind the universe is a very mysterious thing, and should be allowed to remain so.' In consequence the Church of England became 'a God-fearing receptacle for intelligent doubt; the marrying of a quietist belief in order, duty, decency and the evident difference between right and wrong with a shrewd suspicion that anyone who thinks he can be sure of more than that is probably dangerous.'<sup>27</sup> Many would agree and would empathise with David Cameron in his self-identification with people who are 'racked with doubts, but sort of fundamentally believe, but don't sort of wear it on our sleeves or make too much of it.'<sup>28</sup> If the challenge to the Church of England might be thought of as keeping in touch with the doubter's half-belief, the reality is that it often gives the impression that it half-believes itself.

### **A certain understanding of comprehensiveness**

Behind this half-belief, and this is another inhibitor, is *a glorification of a certain understanding of comprehensiveness* – namely that it should be virtually unlimited. This view is often celebrated. It can be traced back to the nineteenth-century liberal

<sup>25</sup> See [www.cofe.anglican.org/worship/liturgy/commonworship/introduction/](http://www.cofe.anglican.org/worship/liturgy/commonworship/introduction/)

<sup>26</sup> Twisk 2002, online at [www.thetablet.co.uk/article/3958](http://www.thetablet.co.uk/article/3958)

<sup>27</sup> Parris 2005, online at [http://www.spectator.co.uk/article\\_archive.php?id=5922&page=1](http://www.spectator.co.uk/article_archive.php?id=5922&page=1).

<sup>28</sup> Watt and Wintour 2008, on line at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2008/jul/16/davidcameron.conservatives>.

theologian, F.D. Maurice. He argued 'that the English church is a union of opposites, both of which are required for the completeness of truth, and for the practical tasks laid upon it.'<sup>29</sup> This, Maurice believed, was particularly congenial to the English national character which was less interested in producing one over-arching theory of truth than in making matters work practically on the ground. The result of this valuing of opposites, Sykes argues, has been disastrous. It has led 'to an ultimately illusory self-projection as a Church without any specific doctrinal or confessional position.' 'There is a great difference', Sykes powerfully asserts, 'between saying that a body like a church has found it practically possible to contain people who hold opposed and contradictory views, and saying that that church believes that all of the contradictory views are true and in some hitherto undiscovered way reconcilable.'<sup>30</sup> This 'bogus theory of comprehensiveness' has, he continued, 'an irresistible attraction for bishops endeavouring to achieve a *modus vivendi* between warring groups in their dioceses.'<sup>31</sup>

Others of course see comprehensiveness as encompassing a range of views around a commitment to fundamentals. Thus George Carey, when he was Archbishop, attacked the 'anything goes' concept of comprehensiveness as 'a mischievous notion' and urged 'that the limits of diversity are precisely conformity to "the constant interplay of Scripture, tradition and reason".'<sup>32</sup> This more traditional view of comprehensiveness leads away from Maurice's apparent view that somehow or other all liberal views, because they are at a polarity, must be granted credibility. 'Views', in Sykes' words, 'are neither right nor wrong by being liberal in character.'<sup>33</sup>

### Liberalism

The Mauricean view lies behind the *third* inhibitor – *liberalism*. It was particularly dominant in the seventies and eighties when the Church of England became more and more incoherent in its theological pronouncements. There was no agreement in the Doctrine Commission because contributors seemed to start from two mutually opposed world-views – one in which faith was central and the other which had bought into a rationalist, Enlightenment view of the world. It illustrated a Church of England which had lost its way. 'To put it bluntly', judges Alister McGrath, 'Anglicanism began to give the impression that it had not the slightest idea what it was there for, or what it had to say to the world.'<sup>34</sup> That was serious because theology is ultimately about how God connects to his world. It meant that theology increasingly became the domain of the university, detached from faith, academic in the narrowest sense, pursuing questions for their own interest and gradually abandoning any sense of questing for ultimate truth, abandoning any belief, that is, in God. Often, Professor Basil Mitchell said of the time, 'when given the opportunity to explain Christian doctrine and its implications to a potentially receptive audience, theologians have little definite or distinctive to say.'<sup>35</sup> The consequences were described in gloomily stark terms by Adrian Hastings:

No church can continue for long without a theology possessing a fair measure of internal coherence...It is no refutation of their work to say that there is simply no future for a Church which can produce no reasoned expression of

**29** Sykes 1978: 16.

**30** Sykes 1978: 19.

**31** Sykes 1978: 34.

**32** Carey 1999.

**33** Sykes 1978: 35.

**34** McGrath 1993: 46.

**35** McGrath 1993: 151.



its faith stronger than what the dominant theologians of the seventies were able to muster.<sup>36</sup>

Liberalism rightly points to the need to address the questions of a secular society. But, as Jim Packer argues, theology is not 'best studied in cool and clinical detachment' but rather through 'the relational activity of trusting, loving, worshipping, obeying, serving and glorifying God'.<sup>37</sup>

The good news is that the questions are beginning to be grappled with outside of the dead-end liberalism of the seventies. It is clear that the Doctrine Commission report on salvation in 1995 breathes a different spirit. Gone is the anti-supernaturalism and the studied scepticism; back is a new confidence in the faith received from Scripture and tradition. It is clear that theologians such as Bishop Tom Wright and Professor Alister McGrath are prepared to engage with the biggest issues in ways which are faithful to the Bible and to tradition, which are academically credible and which engage with the contemporary world.

The bad news is that the damage has been severe. The abandonment of the transcendent may, as Robert Hannaford argues, have led to 'the remarkable emergence of New Age religion. Men and women who looked in vain to the western churches for insights into the transcendental dimension of human experience turned instead to paganism or eastern religion'.<sup>38</sup> Because many senior clergy were educated in the seventies and eighties, they still reflect the liberal scepticism of that era.<sup>39</sup>

Moreover, a combination of factors has caused liberalism to remain stronger in the Church of England than one might expect. First, it was at its height through the seventies and there is an inevitable time-lag. Second, the Church of England most easily defaults to that view of comprehensiveness which values above all the diversity of polarity. Third, liberals are often intellectually sophisticated, politically astute and very culturally aware. In relation to their political astuteness they are perhaps more unscrupulous in promoting their own than those from other groupings. Certainly this was a charge that Robert Runcie cheerfully admitted to when he talked very openly about his 'cronyism'.<sup>40</sup> Fourth, the sexuality issues of the past decades have tended to polarize conservatives and liberals very sharply and possibly to push some who were uncomfortable with the conservative position towards a liberal place they would not otherwise have occupied.

### **Apparent lack of confidence in the gospel message**

This leads to the *fourth* inhibitor – *an apparent lack of confidence in the gospel message*. Precisely because the Anglican Church has, in Sykes' view, 'developed, under the impact of modern liberal theology, a breadth of doctrinal tolerance of doubt and internal contradiction unparalleled by that of other episcopal churches ...' it has 'an urgent responsibility to articulate what it stands for'.<sup>41</sup> But the Church of England is not good at articulating what it stands for. Norman's waspish assertion that bishops are most interested in avoiding controversy and living by pragmatism<sup>42</sup> often appears to be uncomfortably true. As a rather telling example of this a recent report of the contribution of bishops to

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<sup>36</sup> Hastings 1986: 662-3.

<sup>37</sup> Quoted in McGrath 1993: 165-6.

<sup>38</sup> Hannaford 1998: 302.

<sup>39</sup> Hannaford 1998: 300.

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<sup>40</sup> Carpenter 1996: 164-5, 341, 346. See also Anthony Howard's *The Purple, the Blue and the Red* on BBC Radio 4, 16/05/1996.

<sup>41</sup> Sykes 1978: 51.

<sup>42</sup> Norman 2004: 6.

the House of Lords was surprised at the 'dearth of arguments that are rooted in theological or biblical perspectives'. While making considerable allowance for the need for arguments that are persuasive to those who do not share their Christian premises, it is difficult not to agree with the authors of the report that this 'does not leave much room for discourse rooted in any tradition other than the liberal'.<sup>43</sup>

The Queen, at the opening of the Eighth General Synod, very courageously reminded her Church leaders that a time of change was a time of opportunity for the Church and that 'at the heart of our faith stands the conviction that all people, irrespective of race, background or circumstances, can find lasting significance and purpose in the Gospel of Jesus Christ'.<sup>44</sup> This sharper focus echoes the convictions of many – and not only within the Church. 'What inspires many', a *Times* leader pronounced as it struggled to express the role of Christianity in British society today, 'is the public and unembarrassed proclamation of faith'.<sup>45</sup> It is sometimes said or implied that the reluctance of the Church to proclaim the gospel of Christ is evidence of admirable Christian humility. Lesslie Newbigin, with all the magisterial authority of a very great missionary thinker nearing the end of his life, judged it as nothing of the sort:

It is, I fear...much more clearly evidence of a shift in belief. It is evidence that we are less ready to affirm the uniqueness, the centrality, the decisiveness of Jesus Christ as universal Lord and Saviour, the Way by following whom the world is to find its true goal, the Truth by which every other claim to truth is to be tested, the Life in whom alone life in its fullness is to be found.<sup>46</sup>

### **Tackling an inappropriate mind-set: eleven missiological principles**

The other major problem the Church of England has to face is that of its structures. The problem at the beginning of the nineteenth century was that its resources did not remotely match the demographic changes in the previous decades and that inherited privileges abounded which opened the Church to ridicule. The problem in the twenty-first century is that it has a creaking Christendom establishment model for post-Christendom missionary needs. Those post-Christendom needs demand flexibility, initiative, great vision and skill in mobilizing and training rapid-response evangelists, and freedom to act according to the mission needs on the ground. The Christendom model, by contrast, requires constant grappling with the task of stretching a dominant one-man ministry, parish model in a setting where the financial, ministry and congregational resources simply do not match the geographical delineations in time.

Yet the Church of England is in a mission situation. Granted that seventy per cent of people say that they are Christians and granted that that statement has some meaning, it does not have the meaning that it had fifty or more years ago. There is not the knowledge base. There is not the loyalty base.<sup>47</sup> There is not the

<sup>43</sup> Partington and Bickley 2007: 41, [www.theosthinktank.co.uk/Files/MediaFiles/Theos\\_theBench.pdf](http://www.theosthinktank.co.uk/Files/MediaFiles/Theos_theBench.pdf)

<sup>44</sup> 'The Queen's speech' on 15th November 2005, [www.cofe.anglican.org/news/hmspeechtogs.html](http://www.cofe.anglican.org/news/hmspeechtogs.html)

<sup>45</sup> Editorial 2005, [www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/leading\\_article/article782300.ece](http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/leading_article/article782300.ece)

<sup>46</sup> Quoted in Coote 2000: 19-20.

<sup>47</sup> Grace Davie speaks of 'believing without belonging'. She argues convincingly that Britain and Europe continue to believe but do not belong but points out that the 'belief' becomes 'increasingly personal, detached and heterogeneous' (Davie 2002: 8).

conviction base. There is not the financial-commitment base. There is, in truth, very little to turn that complex and by no means insignificant vicarious religion into something that affects the behaviour or practical loyalties of the average parishioner in the average parish in England today.

But if the Church of England is in a mission situation, then there is a wealth of experience, from both its own past and the enormous world-wide Church growth that is happening today, to provide new models for its contemplation. In order to do this it must somehow free itself from its long-standing complacency about evangelism. Back in 1981 the report of the external partners of the Church of England concluded that

the Church suffers from the lack of a sense of urgency in evangelism. Its clergy are pastorally not evangelistically orientated, particularly due to their statutory roles as state baptisers, marriers and buriers. This leaves little time for the proclamation of the gospel or for their being enablers of the lay people in mission.<sup>48</sup>

*Resourcing Mission* said that the structures and systems of the Church 'still bear the imprint of a pastoral era which assumed a predominantly conforming population.'<sup>49</sup> Progress was being made in the sense that mission initiatives were being pioneered but many churches saw themselves as 'a club for their existing members without any obvious commitment to mission'.<sup>50</sup> It discovered that fifty per cent of churches had no engagement with young people and many 'accept that position with relative indifference'.<sup>51</sup>

Once the focus turns to the crucial centrality of mission there are eleven challenging missiological principles that leap from the pages of the Bible and mission history as well as from the contemporary church in the Global South.

### **(1) Moving out from a centre**

*First, nearly all effective missionary work has been from a centre outwards.* Most missionaries do not spread themselves thinly across a vast area. They seek to spread out as the work strengthens from the starting place. That is, of course, how missionary work started in this country. It started with something approximating to the minster model and moved outwards from there. Eventually this led to the parish system that we have today. This is now in terminal decline in its present form. Nick Spencer in his study of the parish system cites the irrefutable logic of Bob Jackson: 'An ever-dwindling number of Anglicans cannot keep the same number of buildings going indefinitely...we will be crushed by our own heritage.'<sup>52</sup> Spencer calls for a throwing off of 'the shackles of a single parochial model for the whole country'.<sup>53</sup> Hopefully the very recent steps to allow the development of 'mixed economy' church structures – encouraging the best in the old structures while encouraging new ones to develop – will be a major step forward to finding appropriate new models.<sup>54</sup>

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**48** Church of England General Synod. 1981: para 81.

**49** Church of England General Synod. 2005: para 2.3.

**50** Church of England General Synod. 2005: para 2.7.

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**51** Church of England General Synod. 2005: para 2.7.

**52** Spencer 2004: 54-5.

**53** Spencer 2004: 91.

**54** Slaughter 2009, 7, footnote 5 helpfully traces the origin of the phrase in this context. The article is online at [www.tiny.cc/0jAB6](http://www.tiny.cc/0jAB6).

## (2) Lay people

*Second, effective mission strategy aims to mobilize and use lay people flexibly according to the needs of the situation on the ground.* All those churches which are most successful world-wide in mission use lay people extensively. And that is true wherever you see effective churches working, whether they be Saddleback in California with its 20,000 and growing congregation or the infant church in Uganda in the early 1880s where every learner immediately became a teacher,<sup>55</sup> or the scattered Christians who came to Antioch telling 'the good news about the Lord Jesus' (Acts 11: 20). Such learners turned teachers will inevitably be flexible because they have to adapt to situations for which there will often be no blue-print. Loosely structured teams of laity seem likely to be much more effective than the centrally organised and imposed clergy teams much in favour in the seventies and eighties now often judged as a failed experiment.<sup>56</sup>

## (3) Flexible freedom

This leads to the *third* point and that is that *flexible freedom needs to be encouraged at every level* – ordained and lay. It is a point realised by successful businesses. 'We don't', Sir Terry Leahy the boss of Tesco, tells us, 'have a global blueprint or management by slide-rule... We don't have one Leader and Chairman Terry's Little Red Book. We have thousands of Leaders. What we also have is Tesco values which provide the framework within which everyone works.'<sup>57</sup> That sort of freedom working within agreed values has not often been seen in the Church of England. Its inherited bureaucratic structures and mind-set have sometimes made it seem more like an old Soviet-style command-economy with all sorts of barriers being put in the way of creative advances. The stories that break into the news of evangelistic advances (for example in church planting) being frustrated no doubt hide behind them all sorts of insensitivities and aggressiveness on the part of some of the people on the ground – pioneers are often hot-headed! – but that we should cast off the energy, vision and commitment of those who would advance the gospel suggests unbiblical inflexibility.<sup>58</sup>

The Church of England needs, rather, to find ways of releasing the evangelistic energies that exist within it. It is of much more than passing interest that the one diocese that has grown most in recent years is London. There are all sorts of reasons for that – large churches, big Christian immigrant populations, a low starting threshold – but the most significant is that the diocesan staff have found ways to be flexible, to encourage church growth, to develop a culture which requires 'mission-focussed, innovative and energetic clergy',<sup>59</sup> and to plant churches across parochial boundaries in a way that has eluded, or not been sought, by other dioceses. Its bishop, Richard Chartres, illustrates the tension between his desire

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<sup>55</sup> Taylor 1958: 63.

<sup>56</sup> Jackson 2005: 17-20.

<sup>57</sup> Leahy 2005, online at [www.guardian.co.uk/public/story/0,14570,1406231,00.html](http://www.guardian.co.uk/public/story/0,14570,1406231,00.html)

<sup>58</sup> Currently at least seven church plants are operating outside the normal structures of the Church of England because the system has not been able to accommodate them.

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The reasons that they became separate range from the inflexibility of the old legislation, through the break-down of relationships within a diocese to disquiet about the perceived heterodoxy of particular bishops.

<sup>59</sup> Jackson 2003, online at [www.london.anglican.org/resources/Blocks/8914/A%20Capital%20Idea.pdf](http://www.london.anglican.org/resources/Blocks/8914/A%20Capital%20Idea.pdf)

for freedom and church bureaucracy as he complains that there is 'far too much law in the Church of England' with its 'impenetrable jungle of regulations and legislation'.<sup>60</sup> He and his predecessor were emboldened to challenge the heritage and the results are staggeringly different from the neighbouring dioceses. While London experienced a 16 per cent increase in the ten year period Bob Jackson surveyed, the London section of Chelmsford and Southwark declined by 16 and 8 per cent respectively.<sup>61</sup>

#### **(4) Indigenous clergy**

*Fourth*, churches which are missionary and growing *encourage indigenous clergy*. One of the early convictions of many Anglican missionary strategists was the importance of indigenous clergy. It was a theme echoed by other traditions. Thus Bishop Daniel Comboni, a Roman Catholic missionary in the Sudan, looked to setting up colleges along the African coast 'where African youths can be instructed in the Faith, educated and civilized without being Europeanized'.<sup>62</sup> Thus Bishop Edward Steere, an Anglo-Catholic bishop in Central Africa, concluded that the 'one thing missions have learned everywhere' is 'the advantage, if not the necessity, of a Native Clergy, and it would be well if England learnt the same lesson'.<sup>63</sup> But the Church of England can scarcely be said to have learned that lesson. It excluded, Herbert Kelly the founder of the Society of the Sacred Mission argued passionately, the working-class from its ministry because of its tendency 'to think more of gentility, position and respectability, than of priestliness and the unshrinking love of souls'.<sup>64</sup> And that was disastrous, for 'a class ministry means a class Church' where the working-class do not feel that they belong.<sup>65</sup> While more working-class and fewer upper-middle class candidates are now recruited, the dominant impact of theological colleges and courses still produces a fairly homogenized social base-line uniformity for its clergy. The suggestion of the Hind report that all clergy should be graduates<sup>66</sup> is an indication of how much it still clings to middle-class ministerial expectations.

#### **(5) Diverse gifts and ministries**

*Fifth*, churches which are growing have often thought at some depth about *the range of gifts which are needed for different types of ministry*. In particular they have given their minds to the differences between those who are called to an evangelistic ministry and those who are called to a pastoral ministry. That these were different callings was centrally important for Henry Venn, the great nineteenth century missionary strategist. He saw missionaries as facing a constant temptation to focus on pastoring. As they did so, he argued, their time for evangelism would be reduced, their converts would become dependent on them and they would be sucked into the increasingly complex structures of the churches they had planted.<sup>67</sup> Their calling was rather the planting of churches. And Venn was no lone voice. That missionaries should not be pastors was Victorian missionary orthodoxy.<sup>68</sup> The Victorians were

<sup>60</sup> Chartres 2001.

<sup>61</sup> Jackson 2003.

<sup>62</sup> Werner, Anderson, and Wheeler 2000: 159.

<sup>63</sup> Heanley 1888: 383.

<sup>64</sup> Kelly 1902:46.

<sup>65</sup> Kelly 1902: 47.

<sup>66</sup> Church of England Archbishops' Council. 2003: 24. Further information on this

available at [www.cofe.anglican.org/lifeevents/ministry/workofmindiv/tetc/safwp/](http://www.cofe.anglican.org/lifeevents/ministry/workofmindiv/tetc/safwp/)

<sup>67</sup> Williams 1990: 26.

<sup>68</sup> See for example the minute to that effect at a Conference of Missionary Societies in 1860 (Secretaries to the Conference 1860: 310).

concerned to preserve the distinction because they felt it echoed the New Testament understanding of evangelism where church planting and moving on to 'the regions beyond' was the fundamental task of the evangelist. They feared the creation of 'dependency' cultures with the local church becoming dependent on the external missionary and the evidence before them was that evangelism could not long survive if the evangelists allowed themselves to become pastors. To look again at London, it is surely significant that it does not expect a new incumbent to be 'a parish pastor or a congregational chaplain but a leader in mission'.<sup>69</sup>

The difference is not only between pastors and evangelists. A large church demands a totally different sort of minister from a small one. Rick Warren speaks of the distinction between 'a shepherd and a rancher'. The shepherd or pastor wants to know his sheep. That's great but it inhibits the growth of the church to, Warren surmises, about 150. Something different from the traditional pastoral role, he continues, is needed in developing large churches.<sup>70</sup> It's that sort of realism about the different nature, character and leadership styles between large and small churches<sup>71</sup> that seldom seems to be on Anglican horizons. But these differences are every bit as important as the difference between rural, urban and suburban and demand radically different skills and training.

Yet in the Church of England the small-church, pastoral understanding of ministry remains dominant. It has long been recognized that clergy are, as *To a Rebellious House?* put it, 'more pastorally than evangelistically orientated'.<sup>72</sup> The reasons for that start with selection for training for ministry. Having frequently served as a selector, I am left with mixed feelings of admiration for its effectiveness and professionalism and questioning whether there is not a type of person that is being left out – young, aggressive, visionary, evangelistic, perhaps a bit angular, but dynamic and not always all that comfortably 'nice'.<sup>73</sup> Quite like, in other words, some of the apostles!

There is fairly massive evidence that the Church of England, along with other traditional denominations, tends to recruit sensitive, introverted and, when male, 'feminine personalities'.<sup>74</sup> The Anglican Church, says the sociologist Professor Leslie Francis, increasingly produces male clergy who feel at home 'in a highly feminised environment' but are likely to puzzle or alienate 'many men who are used to a very different type of leadership in the work-place'.<sup>75</sup> He is surely right to say that the church should be more concerned at 'matching better "the very different jobs that crop up, and the very different skills that clergy have."' <sup>76</sup> He points out that it is the extrovert clergy who tend to lead the larger and growing churches.<sup>77</sup> He notes, very significantly, that those training for missionary work are generally similar to those leading larger and growing churches. They are thinking, judging, extroverts –

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**69** Jackson 2003.

**70** Warren c. 1988.

**71** For example, Keller 2008 at [www.vineyardusa.org/site/files/cutting-edge/08-Spring-Strategy.pdf](http://www.vineyardusa.org/site/files/cutting-edge/08-Spring-Strategy.pdf)

**72** Church of England General Synod. 1981: para 120.

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**73** Maxtone Graham 1993: 34. She found niceness one of the CofE's most irritating characteristics!

**74** Meyrick 1998.

**75** Francis 2006: 1.

**76** Hillman 2001.

**77** Gledhill 2005, online at <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/article/0,,2-1890944,00.html>.

(ESTJ in the Myers-Briggs schema) – rather than the feeling introverts required for pastoral ministry. This suggests, he concludes, that the demands of missionary work ‘call out very different qualities of leadership from the demands of parish ministry’ – a reality understood for a very long time by mission strategists. Yet the Church of England remains overwhelmingly disposed towards those with pastoral gifts. It, in other words, seems to have had a ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach to ministry. The problem is that the size it has been most drawn to is arguably the least well-equipped for mission and evangelism today. Its ministry candidates are excellent at pastoring ‘ever dwindling, aging and feminised congregations’ but not at growing new churches.<sup>78</sup> Meanwhile, the gung-ho, testosterone-fuelled, often young extroverts are too often turned down because they frighten the selectors trained to look for collaborative ‘sensitivity’! We need, says Rowan Williams, ‘to help break down the perennial suspicion between the historic mainstream and the risk-taking innovators. The historic mainstream, after all, had its origins in risk-taking innovators.’<sup>79</sup> We need, argues Leslie Francis, to deal with the reality that ‘there is a discrepancy between the theology of vocation (all may be called) and the empirical reality (some types are more likely to hear that call and to have the call recognised by the selection processes)’.<sup>80</sup> What we have is arguably a product of poor missiology and poor theology.

An attempt has been made to rectify this in the development of ‘Pioneer Ministers’. They are to be ‘missionary leaders’ to be ‘deployed in pioneering contexts’. It was intended that they should be different – selected by people with special understanding of pioneer ministry and trained in relevant ways. They were to be a move away from the ‘one-size-fits-all’ mentality. Indeed the Director of the Ministry Division spoke publicly of radical new directions in relation to selection and training as a firm and agreed policy in the autumn of 2004. Somewhere along the line the Bishops got cold feet. They identified ‘a number of concerns’. They decreed that Pioneer Ministers were not to be ‘a different category or class of ordained ministry’. ‘All of the selection criteria for ordained ministry therefore’, they continued, ‘apply to selection for ordained pioneer ministry.’ And why should this be? It is, they told us, so that all should be appropriately trained and that all should also be fitted for ‘parochial or chaplaincy posts’.<sup>81</sup> It’s a bit like setting up a system which required potential brain-surgeons to be able also to be GPs. The exercise is parish-driven. It is driven, in other words, by the conviction that the perceived pastoral requirements of the parish must never be lost and must in the end control everything. This is despite much evidence from across the whole of church history that evangelistic and pastoral gifts are generally not given to the same person. Indeed they are most often opposite rather than complementary gifts. Why else does Paul differentiate pastors and evangelists (Eph. 4:11)? Meanwhile, despite the welcome thinking behind Pioneer Ministers, those not previously chosen because the criteria were too parish focussed will remain unchosen because they remain too parish focussed.

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**78** Francis 2006: 1.

**79** Williams 2004, at [www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/1047](http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/1047).

**80** Francis 2007, at [www.churchtimes.co.uk/content.asp?id=36090](http://www.churchtimes.co.uk/content.asp?id=36090).

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**81** Church of England Archbishops’ Council. 2006: 3 (my italics), online at [www.acpi.org.uk/downloads/Ordained\\_Pioneer\\_Ministers\\_Guidelines.pdf](http://www.acpi.org.uk/downloads/Ordained_Pioneer_Ministers_Guidelines.pdf)

## (6) Self-supporting churches

*Sixth, the churches which are missionary and growing are taught, and quickly, how to stand on their own feet.* "There is not a hint", says Roland Allen, 'from beginning to end of the Acts and Epistles of any one church depending upon another, with the single exception of the collection for the poor saints at Jerusalem.'<sup>82</sup> It is Allen's argument that what is important here is not so much the money but the impact arrangements about money have on 'the minds of the people' by developing an unhealthy spirit of dependency.<sup>83</sup>

Professor Robin Gill has established beyond reasonable doubt that the Church of England has long operated on the opposite principle. It has historically discouraged congregations from taking financial responsibility for themselves. That has enhanced a dependency culture. With that has gone a decline in commitment to the church. The Church of England has consequently, he argues persistently through a number of publications, been 'subsidising its own decline'. It has allowed 'a yawning gap to appear between the ability and willingness of congregations to pay for their clergy and the actual deployment of clergy'. The net result is that the Church of England 'has been subsidising maintenance – and a declining maintenance at that – rather than mission' and also 'has largely lost its will to foster and seek out new members'.<sup>84</sup> The Church of England has 'subsidised inefficiency' and has produced 'lethargy'.<sup>85</sup> It has, he continues, encouraged clergy not to ask questions about numbers and money.<sup>86</sup> It has paid them 'whether or not they engaged in mission outreach, and whether or not they had effective congregations.'<sup>87</sup> A subsidy mentality, he concludes, has become 'ubiquitous even if the pattern of the subsidy changes in each century'.<sup>88</sup> And the most devastating consequence of all that is the enervating effect it has on mission. In particular, because the importance of consensual leadership is emphasized, those clergy 'who have no interest in mission, and who regard the numbers of people coming to public worship as irrelevant, have an equal say with those who do believe in mission and are deeply concerned about numbers.'<sup>89</sup> As if to prove the point, London, the main recent example of expansion, subsidises fewer parishes. It places the emphasis not on parishes paying 'a growing amount of money' but rather on their offering 'to God a growing number of people'.<sup>90</sup>

## (7) Evangelism

*Seventh, churches which are growing have evangelism at their heart.* The real test of religion, said Tony Blair very recently, is 'whether in an age of aggressive secularism it has the confidence to go out and make its case by persuasion.'<sup>91</sup> It would be stretching the truth to say that the Church of England has given any great impression of having persuasive evangelism at its heart. 'Realism and honesty', acknowledges Stephen Sykes, 'compel us also to admit that it is not self-evident for Anglicans to speak enthusiastically about evangelism. Despite an honoured tradition of Evangelicalism, we have not been the most evangelistically minded of

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<sup>82</sup> Allen 1962 [1912]: 5.

<sup>83</sup> Allen 1962 [1912]: 49-52.

<sup>84</sup> Gill 1991

<sup>85</sup> Gill and Burke 1996: 59.

<sup>86</sup> Gill and Burke 1996: 60.

<sup>87</sup> Gill and Burke 1996: 43.

<sup>88</sup> Gill 2003: 36.

<sup>89</sup> Gill and Burke 1996: 67.

<sup>90</sup> Jackson 2003.

<sup>91</sup> Richardson 2009.



Churches.<sup>92</sup> The Decade of Evangelism was an attempt to rectify this but it failed because, as Gill puts it, 'it was based upon words and rhetoric and not upon identifying clearly and then changing long-established patterns of behaviour.'<sup>93</sup>

### **(8) Internal cohesion**

*Eighth*, churches which are growing have *some internal cohesion about belief and behaviour*. In contrast, the Church of England is perceived to be constantly involved in internal arguments about belief and behaviour. This is particularly focused in a very damaging way on the question of homosexuality. Though the Church of England has delivered the direction of its mind on the matter with uncharacteristic clarity,<sup>94</sup> the debate proceeds as if it had said nothing. Those who disagree with the mind of the Church of England, and that of historic Christianity and that of the great contemporary churches and that of those places where the Church is growing must have the right certainly to make an alternative theological case. What they do not have the right to do is to act as if there was no consensus. That is deeply damaging to evangelism. It is very difficult to present the Good News of the Kingdom when all that those outside see and hear is the endless squabbles of those who claim to be part of that Kingdom.

### **(9) Cultural relevance**

*Ninth*, churches which are growing seek to present the gospel in terms that are culturally relevant. Driven by this imperative there is considerable 'variety' in the use of liturgy in many churches which are growing and you would be fortunate indeed in some to find a robe other than in some dusty vestry cupboard that few people know anything about! Yet when the matter of some relaxation in the wearing of robes was raised at the last General Synod, it reacted with great impatience by rejecting the motion for change – the leaders in mission, bishops, overwhelmingly supporting that rejection<sup>95</sup> – despite the strength of the case of the cultural inappropriateness of robes in some settings. Very recently it threw out a motion to draft special eucharistic prayers for young people, persuaded, against all the evidence of those who have undertaken successful work with young people, that this would be 'a waste of time and effort'.<sup>96</sup> It does help to form the picture of a Church still too frequently shaped by the past rather than by the gospel and cultural imperatives of the present.

### **(10) Learning from God's work**

*Tenth*, churches which are growing consciously learn from what the Lord is doing in their midst. They look for models of 'success'. The Church of England, in contrast, often appears uncomfortable with the notion of growth. There is seldom an active seeking out of the lessons that larger and more 'successful' churches might have to teach. There is of course a proper culture in the Church of England of encouraging small

**92** Sykes 1991: 406.

**93** Gill 2003: 204. See also Jackson 2002: 46.

**94** Church of England House of Bishops. 2003.

**95** [www.cofe.anglican.org/about/gensynod/proceedings/2002nov/rp2002novday3.pdf](http://www.cofe.anglican.org/about/gensynod/proceedings/2002nov/rp2002novday3.pdf), the November 2002 Synod Debate on 'The Vesture of Ordained and Authorized Ministers (GS Misc 679A and GS Misc

679B)', pp 161-85. Significantly while the bishops and clergy voted strongly against (7/24 & 69/118 respectively) the more 'feet on the ground' laity were in favour (98/92).

**96** February 2009 Synod, reported at [www.churchtimes.co.uk/content.asp?id=70664](http://www.churchtimes.co.uk/content.asp?id=70664).

things. But is there not also an improper culture of being suspicious of what appears to be growing, big and successful? Many large churches are rapidly becoming the financial mainstream of the church and yet they are often kept on the margins – not encouraged to be part of the power structures.

The ten biggest churches in the country (that is, churches with an average Sunday attendance of more than 1000) have leaders of very considerable calibre, yet these leaders are seldom thought of for higher leadership in the church.<sup>97</sup> Bob Jackson has called for the success of some large London churches in breaking through the numerical 'glass ceiling' of about 150 to be 'examined, celebrated and disseminated in order to help other churches in similar situations'. There is, however, little evidence that this has happened. His highly relevant report seems to have been largely unnoticed outside of London.<sup>98</sup>

In a command-economy mentality, successes are regarded with suspicion if they have been achieved, as they almost certainly will have been, by by-passing some of the commands. In an open economy there is by contrast an eager attempt to learn what have been the factors which have led to success. So the Jerusalem Church sent Barnabas to find out the amazing things that were happening at Antioch – quite outside every expectation for church growth that it had had and therefore any of its organizational provisions. When he came and saw that it was of God 'he rejoiced and he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast devotion' (Acts 11:23).

## (11) Vision

*Lastly, growing churches have a vision.* Do we not need church leaders who are continuously seeking to discover a shared vision? It is not, in the first place, a vision of action. It is a vision, as the Archbishop of Canterbury reminds us, of God. What he prays for the Church is 'confidence; courage; an imagination set on fire by the vision of God the Holy Trinity; thankfulness.'<sup>99</sup> From that flows discipleship and from discipleship flows evangelism.

## Leading evangelism

Leadership is very important in evangelism and in the Church of England that means bishops. The famous report *Towards the Conversion of England* called for bishops to arrange gatherings of their clergy to get a new vision for evangelism.<sup>100</sup> By 2005 the bishop was being given a more central role in evangelism. He is, argues *Resourcing Mission*, 'a leader in mission'.<sup>101</sup> The same phrase is used in the report on women bishops. It goes on to emphasize that in the early church 'bishops were constantly engaged in mission to those outside the Church'. From that it concludes that a leader in mission is one of the five defining roles of the bishop.<sup>102</sup>

**97** John Stott, to take the most famous example of this, would have liked to have been a bishop (see Dudley-Smith 2001: 42-5).

**98** Jackson 2003: Part 4, at [www.london.anglican.org/resources/Blocks/8914/A%20Capital%20Idea.pdf](http://www.london.anglican.org/resources/Blocks/8914/A%20Capital%20Idea.pdf)

**99** Williams 2003, at [www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/842](http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/842).

**100** Church of England Archbishops' Commission on Evangelism. 1945: para 90.

**101** Church of England General Synod. 2005: para 2.5, 4.4. The phrase was also used at Lambeth in 1988.

**102** Church of England House of Bishops' Working Party on Women in the Episcopate. 2004: para 2.3.33, online at [www.cofe.anglican.org/info/papers/womenbishops.pdf](http://www.cofe.anglican.org/info/papers/womenbishops.pdf)

This is a concept that merits closer examination. What does it mean? If it means that bishops expect, facilitate, encourage, oversee and sometimes engage in evangelism then it must surely be welcomed enthusiastically. If it means that bishops define, control and see themselves as the primary instruments of evangelism then it becomes an altogether more questionable assertion. From the very earliest days of the Church's outreach effective evangelism has sometimes operated at the outer edges of the Church's control. The evangelism of Antioch, to return to that critical example, did not come at the behest of the Church in Jerusalem. That Church was taken entirely by surprise. It did not authorize or control the initial evangelism and very probably would not have done so had it been asked. What it did was to recognize the spiritual reality of what happened *after it had happened*. Even in the sphere of the great evangelist Paul, evangelism seems to have proceeded in a fairly ecclesiastically uncontrolled way and sometimes with questionable motivation through rather self-centred and bombastic people. Such matters were not of primary concern to Paul. What mattered for him was that the Gospel was preached (Phil. 1: 15-18).

It is much more difficult for contemporary bishops of the Church of England to be so generously flexible. They represent a large, legally bound organization with many delicately-balanced competing interest groups. Their primary concern is for its pastoral care. They are expected to be cautious, somewhat delphic, judicious and concerned for the unity of the flock entrusted to them. They are weighed down by the institutional and bureaucratic heritage of the past with all its powerful constraints. It's not very surprising that very rarely have Church of England bishops been very effective in hands-on evangelism. Indeed they have often sought to stand aloof from significant fresh evangelistic initiatives because they frequently upset the *status quo* which most of them instinctively value and protect. John Wesley, Charles Simeon, the Oxford and ritualist movements, the early Billy Graham crusades, Alpha in its infancy, early church planting, mega churches all stand as incontrovertible evidence of this in the history of the Church of England. Arguably bishops were and are right to be cautious. Their primary concern is with those already in the Church.

The bishop's role in mission was much debated in the context of the nineteenth-century missionary movement. Those on the more Catholic wing urged that bishops should be pioneer church planters. They cited, heavily influenced by the Oxford Movement's understandable dislike of Erastian and prelatical bishops and their consequent intense search for a more credible model, historical evidence that this is what happened in the early church. The Broad Church Bishop Tait and the evangelical Henry Venn made common cause to argue that bishops should be created *after* the Church had begun to emerge. The role of bishops was primarily within the Church once it had begun to take shape. They pointed to historical evidence that this had been the general pattern in the Church's outreach. Their history was far more authentic than the romantic Catholic recreation of episcopacy in the early church. Augustine, to take an example drawn on by Tait, came to Kent but was not consecrated as a bishop until after the Church had been formally set-

up.<sup>103</sup> In pressing this line of argument the CMS urged that evangelism in the New Testament came as a consequence of '*individual earnestness*'.<sup>104</sup>

If a bishop has a high view of his central role in *carrying out* evangelism – as opposed to *facilitating* it – he is likely to become involved in impossible and irreconcilable conflicts between his organizational and institutional role and his evangelistic and missionary role. The current Bishop of Southwark apparently proceeds from the conviction that the bishop 'takes responsibility for the mission in his diocese'.<sup>105</sup> If by that he means a highly personalized and hands-on view of his episcopal role then conflict with the sometimes free-ranging (and often troubling) '*individual earnestness*' on the ground is almost inevitable. The hands-on bishop finds himself forced to ask quasi or actual legal questions and to raise complex organizational issues and consequently to put the brakes on if he (or his ecclesiastical lawyers) are not satisfied. The hands-off bishop can give himself room to wait and see before asking the key biblical questions – 'Is Christ being preached? Is the grace of God evident in what is happening?' The latter approach has the advantage not only of being much closer to the practice of the New Testament but also of taking on board the reality that, across the whole sweep of church history, bishops whose primary purpose is hands-on evangelism are the exception and when, like Patrick in Ireland, they appear, their pioneering styles are often not to the liking of their more conventional fellow bishops.<sup>106</sup> It has the further advantage that it coincides with the well established leadership principle that the best leaders are those who give the broad vision and then allow those under them the maximum freedom to implement that vision by whatever means seems appropriate in their context.

The Church of England has made significant steps in giving itself more mission-orientated structures, particularly over the last five years. In these the bishop is central. A key question, not obviously addressed, is whether he will be flexible and light-touch or controlling and hands-on. The Archbishop of Canterbury, like Tait and Venn, points in the light-touch direction when he urges that the Church is 'something that happens before it is something that is institutionally organized'.<sup>107</sup> But can the bureaucratic and legalistic inclinations of the Church of the England cope with the possibility of anything happening before ensuring that it is 'institutionally organised'? If they cannot, like the civil servants in *Yes Minister* or in Dickens's Circumlocution Office, they will inevitably prevent it happening. Ominously and ironically the Archbishop made his comment in the context of 'the longest and widest-ranging piece of legislation' to go through General Synod for decades.<sup>108</sup> So far as major new mission initiatives are concerned the key part of

**103** Davidson and Benham 1891: I, 329. Tait later became Archbishop of Canterbury. See also White 1968: 88-9. In the presentation of these arguments in current Church of England documents there is a single-eyed focus on the more Catholic understanding of episcopacy at this point (see Church of England House of Bishops' Working Party on Women in the Episcopate. 2004: paras 2.3.33 – 2.3.39) with no indication that the evidence of history is considerably less clear-cut.

**104** Williams 1990: 17.

**105** Perkin 2005.

**106** O'Loughlin 2005: 17. See also Patrick, *Confessions*, paras 26, 32, 37, 46 (online at [www.ccel.org/p/patrick/confession/confession.html](http://www.ccel.org/p/patrick/confession/confession.html))

**107** Williams 2007, at [www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/431](http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/431).

**108** Slaughter 2009: 4.

this legislation was the setting out of the requirements for the setting up of what are called 'Bishop's Mission Orders'. These Orders should facilitate church plants and other initiatives across parish and even diocesan boundaries. By this means the Church of England has, it must be hoped, finally discarded some of the most cumbersome parts of its inherited Christendom structures. Whether it has changed the mind-set sufficiently (and the rather controlling title 'Bishop's Mission Order' is not very encouraging in this respect) time will tell. Those church plants which have departed from normal diocesan supervision do not seem yet to be returning<sup>109</sup> – perhaps because the pain of rejection has been great, perhaps because the benefits of being free are not easily given up, perhaps because no advances have been made to them. Furthermore the fear remains that the new legislation has piled onto bishops tasks which call for a degree of spontaneous flexibility from them that conflicts with their role in the settled church and its demands and expectations. Another fear is that the amount of extra work involved will be 'disproportionate' in its demands.<sup>110</sup>

## Conclusion

The Church of England is at a low place institutionally. Add in the prospect of splits and the picture is even more gloomy. And yet green shoots of life are apparent and indeed have sometimes produced great fruit. The last five years have seen unprecedented attempts to sweep away some of the largest legal and mind-set barriers to mission and evangelism and, in the final General Synod voting, there was only one solitary dissident over the three houses. There is, Archbishop Rowan declared, a 'gradual but inexorable shift in the whole culture of our Church' so that 'discovering new expressions of the Church's life has now, rather paradoxically, become part of the bloodstream of the traditional, mainstream Church's life.'<sup>111</sup> Gradual it certainly is. Inexorable we pray that it will be. One of the shifts that the Archbishop himself models is a shift away from Church of England elitism and denominational pride. The really important question becomes not, as he puts it, 'Is it really Anglican, or Methodist, or Baptist?' but '*Is it really Church?* Is this a place and a community where people are expecting the Risen Jesus to be tangibly at work and the Holy Spirit making a difference? Is this a place and a community where people can begin to see that what makes the Church what it is and holds it together is the sheer strength of God's promise and invitation through the living Jesus?'<sup>112</sup> On the answer to such questions will depend whether the Church of England can at last learn to evangelise.

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**109** Crosslinks currently looks after seven of these plants in England.

**110** Paterson 2008: 59, online at [www.oxford.anglican.org/index.php?option=com\\_docman&task=doc\\_download&gid=5590&Itemid=74](http://www.oxford.anglican.org/index.php?option=com_docman&task=doc_download&gid=5590&Itemid=74)

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**111** Williams 2007.

**112** Williams 2008/09: 13, at [www.institute.wycliffecollege.ca/?p=628](http://www.institute.wycliffecollege.ca/?p=628) and at [www.freshexpressions.org.uk/uploads/documents/mixed-economy-journal-2008.pdf](http://www.freshexpressions.org.uk/uploads/documents/mixed-economy-journal-2008.pdf)

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