

## THE CHRISTIAN MINISTRY IN A CHANGING WORLD

The Christian ministry has from its inception operated largely successfully within the context of prevailing cultures (*Acts 15*), as representatives of the body of Christ and existing within time and history as the visible sign and sacrament of the Kingdom of God. This is an ultimate context that serves not only as a reminder of the urgency of mission because the Church is a sign of the end times, but also serves to keep in sharp perspective the issues which are presented by the changing patterns of modern Western society.

These changes can be attributed to the change in emphasis on authority from the Church to the individual brought about by the Enlightenment. For example, prime mover Descartes argued that human reason is the final authority capable of establishing its own rules and limits in dealing with the world and human life. Confidence in this rationality became the driving force behind the progress of modernity, the growth of autonomous science and technology and the organisation of society on the basis of materialism. It was a confidence

in the possibility of liberating and humanising the world which, whilst not excluding the Church, neither needed it to maintain that confidence. In effect, modern Western society had become secularised. Indeed, since the 1950s the Church in the UK has seen a dramatic drop in church attendance across the denominations. Nevertheless, the English language remains informed by the Bible and the rites of passage of the Church of England remain the criteria by which most people regulate their lives. Modern Western society has also been changed by a pluralism that may be defined as a fundamental shift where different faiths, religious or humanistic co-exist in various states of co-operation or competition.

If the Christian ministry is to be effective in this secular and pluralistic context and at the same time, remain faithful to Christ's charge (*Matthew 28:18-20*), then it should seek to address people's perception of the Church as authoritative and out of touch. Essentially, this means a proactive and dynamic ministry seeking a united Church within the biblical understanding of communion in the one body of Christ. Change and renewal must, however, remain true to the ecclesial identity of the people of God. Certainly, huge strides in ecumenical dialogue have resulted from Vatican II but there remains much outdated dogma that is simply not creditable in a world of free expression of thought that is regarded as a human right. Indeed, there is an ongoing mass exodus of Catholics in Latin America to the Pentecostal and Evangelical churches where believers are empowered through Scripture to change society for themselves. The work of scholars of theology such as those of the International Ecclesiological Network has considerable influence on academic ecumenism. Meantime, we are privileged here in Bosham to actually live out the ecumenical agenda in the inter-action between our churches.

It could be argued that the Church is currently perceived as a private religion that is tolerated providing that it does not interfere in the public realm of objective truth. The question is, how is the Church to compete for potential customers within the secular free market place? Certainly, the rapid progress of communication systems has brought the free market into a global village context and consequently, the ministry should be perceived as having a world-wide source of potential customers. Most importantly, the Christian



ministry should continue to engage and interact with the secular disciplines. This should serve to reap the benefits of a wide range of skills which will not only address the question of an holistic approach to current issues, so much part of today's expectation, but will at the same time also serve to reveal the Christian world-view. Some examples of multi-disciplinary ministries are those of healing, death and dying and child protection.

Inroads for mission already exist by churches exerting pressure on Western governments to wipe out third world debt. However, post-modernism has brought about a growth in material expectation perpetuated by the media often using surreptitious advertising techniques. One is mindful that in a past age of widespread illiteracy, churches promulgated the Christian message by the use of biblical images in stained glass windows and wall paintings that were the most effective media for the people of those times. Today, the main cultural message is delivered through television which emphasises choice for the individual and also encourages people's pecuniary instincts! At the same time, progress is being made on the liturgical inculturation front through alternative services which bear the hallmarks of vibrant missionary engagement using the modes of art, communication and expression which are innate to our technological culture. True inculturation should imply openness to innovation and experimentation that encourages local creativity as, for example, in 'messy' church. Whilst questions of church structures, doctrine and biblical hermeneutics inevitably arise in this context of missionary engagement, nevertheless such alternative services provide the opportunity of reaching young people at a critical age when they may otherwise be lost to the Church. The ministry should, therefore, enable flexible liturgical arrangements with pastoral and financial support.

Modern Western society now embraces a diversity of faiths and cultures. The Enlightenment rationalism of the absolute truth has been replaced by relativism so that there is no longer one foundational Christian belief but a diversity of foundational beliefs. In the absence of one shared foundational belief there is a suspicion of meta-narratives whose claims are universal, ultimate, transcendental and definitive. How then should the ministry seek to preserve and further extend the Christian meta-narrative? Certainly, by presenting a unified Church actively engaged in secular marketing techniques within a multi-disciplinary context, the ministry is already offering a vision to other faiths of life lived in the image of Christ. There remains however, the strategy of contextualisation for the possibility of implanting the Christian meta-narrative in native cultural forms as practised perforce by the early Church. Although clearly this form of practical theology is nowadays most applicable to Latin America, it nevertheless has implications also for today's Western society in terms of the Christian ministry establishing dialogue with other faiths.

Clearly the Christian ministry exists in challenging times but no more challenging than the times of the early Christian Church. The key to continuing successful mission should lie in a changed perception of an out of touch ministry by means of communicative praxis and informed dialogue in the community. After all, it is here that the Christian meta-narrative of salvation for all humanity is most clearly manifested. Finally, although the ministry cannot totally embrace secularism and yet remain faithful to Christ's charge, it can nevertheless use secular tools to further mission. Furthermore, it should embrace the pluralistic nature of the community in celebration of the universal nature of God's creation. Indeed, perhaps this will serve to reveal the universal Christ active throughout today's Western society in whatever guise other cultures and faiths may like to present Him! (*1 Corinthians 9:19-22*)

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