

# Does the Future have a Church?

## The Forrester Lecture, St. Andrews University, March 14 2005

### Introduction

Our entire society is reeling from the global changes and conflicts that fill our media, and will reel further from those that will shortly emerge.

There are over 10 billion of us now on a single planet; there is no other planet in sight that can take our overflow, yet, if all countries used up earth's non renewable resources at the rate the USA uses them up, we would require five planets.

Richard Smyre of The Centre for the Communities of the Future predicts these trends:

1. In about twenty years the world's three main sources of non renewable energy will run out. This raises the question: How can we create communities that can cope?

2. Continuous information and technological singularity will create the moment in history when the advances outpace human ability to understand them, so that knowledge of trends is not a sure guide to the future. This raises the question: How do we create communities that can cope with uncertain futures?

3. Demographics. The industrial nations are ageing, inc. Japan, In contrast in much of Asia and the Middle East 50 - 60% are under 18. This will make inroads into our hopes of employment and enrichment. This raises the question: How do we create communities that can cope with a decline in material benefits?

Society is redefining itself: if the church fails to redefine itself, it ceases to be relevant to society. Dr. Tom Sine, the consultant in future research, often asks two questions when he does futures consultations with church networks. Question one is: What were some of the unexpected happenings of the last three decades? Typically, people list things like the drugs scene, AIDS, women's liberation, the fall of communism, global terrorism, the USA/Middle East clash. Question two is: How effectively did the church respond to these challenges? Invariably, he says, the response is 'We didn't do very well'. And one reason for that is that they did not expect the future to be very different, so they failed to prepare the church to adapt. For reasons such as this, the church has become marginalised, and this marginalisation looks set to continue.

In this lecture I want to describe four aspects of the emerging society which make for a marginalised church, and four gaping holes which only a certain kind of faith community can fill. In conclusion I will try to identify emerging models of church which relate to this need.

### Four aspects of the emerging society which make for a marginalised church.

#### 1. Secularisation.

Secularism is the prevailing mores of decision makers. Signs of this as it affects the church are: weddings are being siphoned off from churches into castles; funerals are being siphoned off from churches into non-religious woodland burial grounds; care of souls is being siphoned off from clergy into an array of social, health and psychiatric workers; Christian festivals, including Sunday, are no longer nationally observed.

The term secularisation is used by sociologists of religion to define the declining power of religious institutions since the European Renaissance. It implies a belief that an increasing number of people

have lost belief in religious dogmas as traditionally expressed, but it does not necessarily imply a loss of spirituality. The research conducted by David Hay and Rebecca Nye on children's spirituality suggests that a rift seems to have developed between their intuitions and the possibility of expressing them through the language of the church from which the majority are alienated at many levels and for complex reasons. They show that many children therefore turn towards secret or privatised belief. I suspect that some of their findings apply also to adults. (i)

'Mary' was a secularised non church goer who took a day trip out with her partner. She saw a road sign to a place named Holy island, drove into it, and was engulfed in a sense of peace and a desire to seek God. She searched on the internet for anything to do with Jesus, did two internet courses about Jesus, and came to faith. It never occurred to her to look in churches for this, because, she said, she did not think churches were places that would do that.

Thus the church is marginalised even for people who have spirituality. This is reflected in church attendance figures. The latest figures issued by Christian Research in the UK Christian Handbook are that churchgoing in Scotland has plunged from 17.1% of the population in 1980 to an expected 10.3% this year. The nosedive is steeper in Wales, and in England where only 6.7% are now church attenders. Clearly, church is not working.

## **2. Multiculturalism**

We are no longer seen to be a Christian society, yet, because we are multicultural the religions of incomers are given greater attention. In many newer ethnic groups religion and culture are interwoven: individualism has not, yet, at least, broken down the fabric of extended family and local community. Therefore their seven day a week centres are vibrant and visible, and their voice is increasingly heard by media and politicians. If, as a result of secularism office blocks and leisure centres replaced church buildings as the most visible landmarks in many areas: as a result of multiculturalism mosques and temples replace churches as the most visible and most used religious centres in many urban areas.

## **3. Ecology**

Forests are being destroyed at a massive rate in Brazil and Russia through monetary bribes and in Europe through acid rain. Global warming may well see the submergence of low lying countries such as Bangladesh, even Holland, under the sea.

Experts predict that the wars of the twenties will be water wars. Already the water is being siphoned off from the sources of a great river in one country, so that when it reaches another country it is insufficient for that country's needs. Egypt is one example.

Many of what people call 'the thinking population' are now aware of the environment and its needs; they want to be friends of the earth and to adopt a life style that is sustainable. They look for earth-friendly organisations and philosophies, and the church does not figure. In fact, some critics place blame for the threatening ecological disaster at the door of a church that has treated earth care either as irrelevant to the mission to save the individual soul or as a hindrance to an industrial and technological revolution fuelled by the divine mandate to have dominion over the earth.

## **4. Changing political frameworks**

On a world scale China is set within one generation to equal the USA as an economic superpower, and new alliances between regions and power blocs are forming. The development of the European Union and the universalisation of television is enabling a new political framework to emerge between Britain and Ireland and their constituent parts.

Following on from the Good Friday Agreement a Council of the Isles was established in a treaty in March 1999. This is the informal name for 'The British Irish Council'. The Council comprises representatives of the British and Irish governments, the Northern Ireland Assembly, the devolved institutions in Scotland and Wales, and representatives from the independent Parliaments of the Isle of Man and the Channel Islands. It aims to 'promote positive, practical relationships among the people of the islands, and to provide a forum for consultation and co-operation.' This Council, is an acorn that could grow into an oak.

Emerging cross-border institutions such as The Council of the Isles need and look for supportive political, technological and values infrastructures. The degree to which institutions work well, badly or not at all depends upon these infrastructures. The primary seedbed of the third layer of infrastructure (values) is the faith communities. We may liken political institutions to the skeleton, and faith communities to the soul of the body politic.

However, in many contexts, and in Northern Ireland in particular, churches are perceived as buttresses of the old sectarian or tribal framework which is now being superseded. Thus Presbyterian churches are expected to support the DUP and Catholic churches are expected to sympathetically minister to the population which has the IRA in its bosom. Pastors and priests who too easily cross this divide are thought of as traitors or wimps. Only a few weeks ago a new young Protestant minister was hounded by his congregation for inviting Roman Catholics to their premises. Emerging cross border institutions such as heritage councils which promote cross border pilgrim paths marginalise contemporary churches because they want no place for sectarianism in their emerging framework.

#### **Four growing gaps in the emerging society**

Now I look at four gaping holes in our emerging society which only a certain kind of faith community can fill.

##### **1. The community gap.**

Society is fragmenting and lacks the glue that can hold it together. The break-up of stable family life, and of cohesive local communities produces a population which suffers from loneliness, depression, neurosis and addictions - to things like shopping, drugs, celebrity TV. City centres and housing estates are unsafe at night. Secondary school teaching increasingly becomes crowd control. Staff in education, health and commercial services drop out because of stress at a very high rate.

There are no votes for political parties in facing up to this reality. So they compete to think up some sticking plaster to put on this festering wound which looks prettier than the other party's sticking plaster. More teachers, league tables, special schools for the excluded pupils and so on.

The Health Service with its league tables which measure actions, not quality of patient relationship, and for whom death is a failure, can't be there for the person. Supermarkets play off local producers against poor world subsistence producers: they lose the relationship with their locality and with the environment. And in business: a leading business person said 'I realised those in business know the cost of everything but the value of nothing.'

No society can continue to function healthily if the parts do not relate to the whole, and if its providers do not relate to the person, but only to a person's parts. Churches that relate to the parts have little future: person-centred faith communities that relate the parts to the whole have a huge future.

##### **2. The cultures gap.**

The second gap is between the prevailing politically correct multicultural mishmash and what's actually in the guts of ethnic and religious groups at the grass roots. Trevor Phillips of the Racial

Equality Commission has recently questioned whether multiculturalism is any longer valid since ethnic groups are emerging who have little allegiance to Britain or its democratic values. When this insulated religious culture takes root the seeds of social conflict and even war are sown.

Robin Wright brings to light some roots of Sacred Rage in her book of that title (Andre Deutsch 1986). Anger at injustice, when it is linked to experience of oppression and of not being listened to, and to a belief that God hates this injustice to and calls for perpetual struggle to overthrow it becomes a time bomb.

Faith communities that share the anger at injustice, that take initiatives in listening to the stories of the oppressed, that engage in perpetual struggle, and that are motivated to reach out to Christ in the other group, be it frightened or hostile - these can fill this gap.

### **3. The ecology gap.**

The third gaping hole is between the ideals of sustainable development and the ability to model this at street level in our cities. Western society suffers from built-in obsolescence. It surely cannot last much longer. Its economy will go into nose-dive if one really major terrorist action succeeds. Things we take for granted such as energy could be cut off and with it our shop, telecommunications and other networks.

Sustainable development is not a middle class luxury, it is essential to everyone's survival. The four directors of a Cumbrian sustainable development company, none of whom were at first Christians, discovered that you could not for long do such work without working out a spirituality. My *Church of the Isles* work book has a unit on *How Churches Can Become Friends of the Earth*; the Eco-congregation movement in Scotland and England is a sign that churches are beginning to bridge this gap.

### **4. The values gap.**

The fourth gaping hole is between the aspiring values of new political frameworks for greater unity, and the cynicism and lack of motivation that undermine the actual values of people and the politicians. In our culture of contempt, with its relentless media character assassination of anyone in the public eye, good people may weary of standing for parliaments and councils. The new kind of faith communities need to be sanctuaries to which jaded politicians may repair, places where the politics of the common good are modelled, nurseries where these values are nourished.

## **Churches are changing**

If the adherents of Christianity do not respond to these needs, then the future in these islands does not have a church, other than as an ornament for a few eccentrics.

However, there is a rustling of the leaves. A Google search identified over 616,000 references to emerging church. All sorts of things are stirring even in established churches. The Church of Scotland's *Church without Walls* movement is at work, as I witnessed when I spent two days with ministers in charge of pioneer church projects. The head of England's established church, Rowan Williams, calls for what he calls a mixed economy church: the inherited church invests in entrepreneurs who experiment with fresh expressions of church - in cafes, pubs, community centres or on the internet. The Church of England's recent report *Mission Shaped Church*, is the first such report I know of which espouses churches that are not bound to the inherited system and its regulations.

A Church of England bishop has given very positive support to the proposal to plant a church based on a core of twelve people who live by the Community of Aidan and Hilda's Way of Life, and who make a daily rhythm of prayer, work, re-creation and hospitality the essence of the church.

The fact that, in many parts of Europe, the models of church that have withstood ravages of centuries

are near the end of their shelf life is causing Christians in churches which have little in common theologically to relate to the changing context of society. What sort of things are they finding?

- \* That in a twenty four hour society, people relate better to seven days a week churches.
- \* That in a multi-choice society people look to churches that offer facilities for a range of temperaments, cultures and ages.
- \* That in what the restaurateur Sir Terence Conrad calls the emerging cafe society, where people gather to do all sorts of things besides eat and drink, churches are eating places as well as praying places.
- \* That in a visual, sound-byte age people resort to churches that use different media - poetry as well as pulpits, storytelling as well as sermons.
- \* That in an age of mass travel, when people look for B&B's and hostels that have a good ambience, churches provide accommodation - in their grounds, or on their web sites. They once again link up with hostel and guest house movements.
- \* That in a multi ethnic society, people expect to find within the wider church services that are culturally Muslim or Sikh in style.
- \* That in an orphaned society, when mentors, life coaches and growth buddies are in demand in the worlds of business, fitness and AIDS care, people seek out spiritual homes where they can find soul friends and mentors.
- \* That in a packaged, pressured society suffering from data overload and stressful bureaucracy people make a bee line for churches where they can chill out, be themselves, have space.
- \* That in a world where equality of regard is written into statutes few people under forty any longer wish to be defined by a protest movement of 450 years ago called the Reformation, but are drawn to churches that are transcending the Protestant or Catholic label.
- \* That at the same time that there is a decline in the 'one-shape-fits-all' type of church, which post modern people link with the power games of history - Protestant and Papist - there is a rising thirst for spirituality, values and gathering places that sustain life together on earth.

### **Villages of God**

Because of this responsiveness there is, in addition to a rise in new and eastern religions, a mushrooming of Christian projects, culture-friendly church plants and networks. You only have to look at the UK Christian Handbook to know this. These are making patterns that are more flexible and culture-friendly than the old. They have been called 'the liquid church'.

I believe that something more than liquid church is possible. By imaginatively linking these new networks with traditional churches the marginalised parts can become part of a greater whole. I use the term villages of God to describe this movement. These start where people are. Some can grow piecemeal. Some are depicted as a village on the local Churches Together web site. Others, stirred by this vision, grow piecemeal, others have a macro plan. This is not the return of the Christendom model. These villages of God serve, they do not oust, the institutions that exist in their area - but like yeast in dough these gain spiritual new awareness, new trust, as a result of the merging wholistic vision and relationship. These villages of God are resonant of the early Celtic monastery model of church which were of the people and known as cities.

Seven day-a-week emerging villages of God typically include several of these features:

- \* Daily corporate prayer
- \* Eating places - e.g. cafes
- \* Accommodation units - e.g. hostel, B&B, on site units for members
- \* Learning courses - resource centre
- \* Work and creative arts projects
- \* Sacred space (Classic FM advert: 'I'm battered all day and night and I must have a little sanctuary'. ..)
- \* Mentors and counsellors
- \* Allotments, gardens or another earth-friendly link
- \* Facilities for all or most ages
- \* Social entertainment

The village of God is like a wheel with spokes that reach into the hub places of society. The spoke takes the form of a supportive presence WITHIN the cultural pattern of the area.

The spiritual hub of the village of God is the people's lay monastery. The hubs of the population which the spokes reach may include: School \* Health Centre \* Supermarket \* Pub \* Sports teams \* Fitness Centre \* Community centre \* Bingo club \* Uniformed organisations \* Police \* Social services \* local media \* Centres of other religions \* Places where disaffected groups hang out \* Night clubs \* The homeless.

These emerging or potential villages of God may be pioneered by a particular faith community such as a 'Warehouse Church'; others comprise congregations from different traditions who network together and spawn new projects. They may be on one site, or on different sites but linked through pilgrim or web site trails. Web sites such as [www.emergingchurch.info](http://www.emergingchurch.info) and our own, [www.aidan.org.uk](http://www.aidan.org.uk) give further information about such developments.

### **The Values of Villages of God**

Such villages of God presuppose certain common values without which they would fall apart. These values are likely to include: respect for life, trust, unity in diversity.

The huge number of emerging church projects is too diverse and embryonic to predict any certain prevailing pattern. If we image them as many shoots, then the need for roots becomes paramount. New fangled faith communities that lack roots will not last. It is therefore significant and exciting that emerging, post-modern churches resonate at a deep level with the experience of the earliest faith communities in these islands. While seeking to be sensitive to the new framework, they also seek deep roots in scripture and in God's hand in their land.

### **How do churches take practical next steps?**

Villages of God with deep roots offer, I believe, a sound a basis for our thinking about the kind of church that meets the needs of the future. But how can churches get from where they are to where they need to be?

Echoing the New Testament symbol of the human body, each of whose parts honours and works with the others, under the leadership of the Head, who is Christ, churches foster a shared vision of what the whole can be, and take the most appropriate next step for themselves as a part.

Thus in an homogenous town such as St. Andrews, one well placed church might institute a rhythm of daily corporate prayer, and invite other churches and groups to help sustain this. Another church or group of churches might sponsor a cafe with other facilities such as a bookshop or study area, perhaps developing a longer term plan to turn a large but nearly redundant church building into a multi-resource centre. The move to restore the town as a place for pilgrims might involve ecumenically further

developing the ruined cathedral as a living sacred space, and providing pilgrim trails and stopping places throughout the town, with pilgrim guides available in shops and churches, on road side plaques and on a St Andrew's Pilgrims Web Site. Following the rather steep rise in the cost of accommodation in St Andrew's, churches might encourage entrepreneurial members to establish low cost pilgrim accommodation.

In response to the question 'How can churches generally make this practical?' the Community of Aidan and Hilda developed workshops for churches. These are now included as a workbook with my book *Church of the Isles: a prophetic strategy for renewal* published by Kevin Mayhew. They explore how churches can be spiritual homes, friends of the earth, centres of creative work and listening, hospitality and healing, daily prayer and godly play, and people-friendly mission.

Bliss Brown, Editor of the Journal of Future Studies, Episcopal priest, and an animator of the Imagine Chicago project, riveted a meeting of The Tomorrow Project in Glasgow with her experience of birthing an emerging transformation. She pinpointed how the weight of current arrangements can pull us back and how the liberated imagination can beckon us forward. She advises us to do exercises with church groups that enable them to discover whether they are re-inforcing what diminishes life or are enabling what she calls 'cultures of blessing.'

Villages of God do not try to control, they seek to connect each part to God. Villages of God ask groups 'what is it you must accomplish?' and help them to do it. Villages of God help us connect public and private life in a new way, so that we understand that as is my group, so is the world. They enable the birds to fly and the elephants to roam and each creature to have what it needs to do what it is meant to do. They enable congregations to be true to themselves, to move beyond denial and pain into something more deeply of God, and more sustaining of their society. Humans do not move in a direction that threatens. Hospitable villages of God enable the positive to flourish. In them the prayer oratory of one tradition and the soup kitchen of another can each be true to its root - but each can flower because it is in an environment that does not attack it. Villages of God become prejudice-free, hate-free, fear-free, earth-friendly fair trade zones. They can be tomorrow's answer to Jesus' prayer 'Your kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven.'

(i) See Hay, David with Nye, Rebecca *The Spirit of the Child* ((Fount 1998)

#### DISCUSSION POINTS FOLLOWING THE LECTURE

'Are the Bible and the Sacrament essential constituents of any church?' Yes, but not in any one form.

'What if church rules prevent everyone coming together for Holy Communion?' Where church rules prevent everyone receiving the bread and wine, there can be services in which everything else is shared, including the prayers, Scripture teaching, and blessed bread distributed to everyone at the close.

'Can mosques and synagogues be part of a village of God?' Christians, Muslims and Jews remain true to their teachings and worship. Their teachings call them to respect and befriend others. This friendship can be expressed in shared eating, meeting, study or recreational places. For centuries Muslims and Christians had separate worship in the same or an adjoining space.

'Are not the most successful churches those that do not dilute their faith by mixing with others?' Some research suggests such churches attract more people initially, but as recruits ask and think and interact, after a time they leave churches that think there is nothing to learn from others, sensing a lack of authenticity. Villages of God enable each church not to water anything down, but to relate to fellow Christians and their neighbours in a Christ-like way.

Ray Simpson

[www.aidan.org.uk](http://www.aidan.org.uk)