



Mission Shaped and Ecumenical – Missioners and Ecumenists in Conversation Aylesford Conference report

1. In March 2010 Churches Together in England (CTE) organised a consultation between an equal number of missioners and ecumenists. We were prompted partly by the commonly held perception that local ecumenical structures hinder rather than help pioneering mission,¹ but also by the deeply held belief that mission and unity are inseparably inter-related theological realities in Scripture.² This report seeks to draw out the main themes of an animated and rich conversation, and for that reason plays fast and loose with the actual chronology of the consultation.

2. The conversation was stimulated by two papers, the first from Graham Cray on ‘Mission in a post-denominational culture’, the second from Loveday Alexander on ‘Patterns of church and mission in the Acts of the Apostles.’

‘Mission in a post-denominational culture’

3. England’s churches stand in a place they have not been in before as Christendom dissolves around them and they are faced with the challenge of mission to generations of the unchurched. According to a Tear Fund survey:

- 25% of the population attend church regularly or occasionally
- 31% of the population are de-churched – used to attend church but no longer do. 5% say they are open to going to church again.
- 34% unchurched, and the proportion of those with any memory of church will decline as the population ages. 1% say they are open to going to church.

That means that conventional models of mission which invite people to return to church (eg. Back to Church Sunday) will become increasingly irrelevant.

- *Is renewal of the Church no longer sufficient? Is renewal without mission self indulgence?*

4. It is unclear what new paradigms of mission will emerge, but incarnational mission appears to be the most promising model of engagement. The ‘shape’ of the church will be determined in part by that process of inculturation. There is no standard model, and imagination and flexibility are precious virtues where the cultural norms of previous generations have been critically weakened. Multiple cultures now overlap and collide in kaleidoscopic diversity, and belonging to anything has become a minority pastime. Contemporary culture is structured for individualism. It is a privatised world, where individual choice has been exponentially multiplied by the internet and the development of social networking and other forms of virtual life-style. Individual choice, consumerism and the deliberate construction of one’s own identity is now the controlling narrative of our culture.

- *How are disciples of Jesus Christ to be made and nurtured in this cultural context?*

5. If culture has changed, so too have the English churches thanks to the movements of the world population which have been so characteristic of modernity and its aftermath. African, Asian, Caribbean and Eastern Christians have enriched Christian England and made English Christianity a microcosm of world Christianity. This is a world in which mission is from everywhere to everywhere, and in which 'reverse mission' is a reality, yet all Christians face the same missionary dilemmas about the inculturation and the limits of diversity.

- *When is a church so inculturated that it is no longer recognisable as 'church'?*

6. The challenge for ecumenism is to move from a sense of unity for the sake of mission, in which the main issues are to do with competing strengths and histories, to unity discovered in mission, growing through shared weaknesses and uncertain futures. If diversity in unity is the aim, we need a unity which allows many expressions.

- *How do we approach mission in a fragmented society without creating a church which is further fragmented?*

7. The discussion that followed the presentation revealed some telling tensions:

- Post-denominationalism is in tension with neo-denominationalism. The religious affiliation of many is no longer determined by whether they grew up as Baptists or Methodists, but by the nature of their local Christian community. Conversely, a number of historic denominations are passionately engaged in defining what it means to be (eg) an Anglican or a Methodist.
- Entrepreneurial evangelicalism (eg. Hope 08) is in tension with inherited ecumenical and denominational structures, but new and unlikely coalitions are beginning to emerge.
- There are ecclesiological tensions between those who understand the nature of the church to be one of progressive growth and adaptation into the fullness of Christ, and those who understand the historic church to have a given definitive shape which is unalterable. Those tensions have always been part of ecumenism, but they are underlined by a process like Fresh Expressions. A Catholic understanding of a fresh expression of church would be very different to a Protestant one.
- There is a tension between admitting the constraints of weakness and vulnerability whilst at the same time providing the stimulating rhetoric of hope and confidence which is part of the burden of expectation on all church leaders. Put more theologically, there is tension between numerical growth and the mission of a crucified God. Perhaps we need what John Millbank has called 'a master-narrative of non-mastery'.
- There is a tension between the church's perception of spirituality (the classical disciplines of prayer, sacraments, fasting etc) and the appropriation of spirituality by the unchurched. Consumerism can be understood as an expression of belonging, and hence as an unspoken critique of the church and its stewardship of the means of grace.

‘Patterns of church and mission in the Acts of the Apostles.’

8. In her paper ‘Fresh expressions of church: the hard questions road show’ (circulated prior to the consultation) and in her further explorations in her session, Loveday Alexander used the history of interpretation of the *Acts of the Apostles* as the lens to examine some of the tensions between inherited and missional church.

9. Is *Acts* the story of the power of the Spirit leading the church out from the traditional places and structures of the sacred towards the marginal, disempowered regions (the ‘Protestant’ reading), or is it the story of Jerusalem and the Twelve providing a focus of centralised authority as a defence against the onslaughts of Gnosticism and worse, thus anticipating ‘Christendom’ (the ‘Catholic’ reading)?

10. The answer, she suggests, is that Luke is smart. He doesn’t think in binary opposites but seeks to capture in story an ecclesiology which is subtle and complex enough to embrace such simplistic opposites as ‘charism and order’, ‘solid and liquid’, ‘inherited and fresh expression’. What he is teaching us is ‘...the hard, painful process of learning to be faithful to God’s Spirit, and to each other’. He is calling us to recognise that the church is about God doing new things, yet surprising us too by his faithfulness to the institutional structures. He spells out the tensions that are inherent in Simeon’s vision – that Christ is at the same time ‘a light to the Gentiles and the glory of your people Israel.’

11. Within that overall theological framework Loveday asked hard questions:

- *Is this narrative a figment of Luke’s imagination?* (she argued ‘not’)
- *Is Christianity inherently supercessionist?* – this is the interfaith question (again, she argued ‘not’)
- *Is mission-shaped church inherently colonialist?* (a more difficult question given the polycentric nature of world Christianity, and the tensions between that emerging reality and traditional power structures as seen so painfully in the Anglican communion)
- *Is mission-shaped church inherently centrifugal, sectarian and anarchic?* (all mission, she suggests following Gonzalez, lives between the twin risks of sectarianism and syncretism)³

12. The discussion which flowed in and around the paper discerned the tensions which Loveday identified as recurring in the movement of the history of the church – for example, Methodism and Pentecostalism could be understood in their own days as ‘fresh expressions’. That means that there is an historical perspective which might help illuminate some of the trickier faith and order (and hence ecumenical) questions triggered by fresh expressions – eg. authority, order, Eucharistic practice etc.

13. In contemporary practice we have to accept the contingent, historical reality that we are where we are. We are the inheritors of denominationalism, of diversity in theology, order and ministry which frustrates our best missional intentions. No church planting comes without baggage, and the process is therefore freighted with possibilities of disagreement and misunderstanding, and we all run the risk of planting

our own versions of Christianity. The old ecumenical agenda is persistent. It will not go away because it is the reality of half a millennium of division and separate development that has made us who we are.

14. Mixing that reality with the imperative of incarnational mission is a recipe for frustration, despite everyone's best intentions. But it is where we are.

Mission-shaped and ecumenical: the discussion

a) *Ecumenical structures*

15. Ecumenism has a weighty PR problem. It carries a stigma. It is understood as part of a Christendom model of being church, institutional, centralised, heavily bureaucratic. The consultation acknowledged that in this sense ecumenism was simply the scape-goat for *all* inherited structures. Local Ecumenical Partnerships (LEPs) are no more stuck in 'maintenance mode' than many parish churches or one denomination churches. However, there was a perceived and therefore important need to renew and re-cast forms of local ecumenical engagement so that local players could be more fleet of foot and responsive.

16. What matters is that appropriate structures are available for appropriate pieces of work. A formal single congregation LEP is unlikely to be the best way to enable an experimental ecumenical fresh expression of church. Conversely, it may be exactly what is needed to create a shared ecumenical church on a new housing estate (eg. Cambourne). CTE and the churches need to ensure that a range of suitable options are available.

17. Denominationalism is still a determining factor in mission planning. A Baptist representative noted that they were engaged in a mapping enterprise without any reference to other denominations, and pleaded for a new vision of unity, a new sense of waiting on God together to discern his will.

b) *Ecumenical mission*

18. The story of a local Churches Together that organises fun days during half terms, organises schools work and RE teaching and enjoys messy church – all organised ecumenically. That sense of uniting in mission often transcends not only denomination but also the theological divide between conservatism and liberalism. Much of what is happening locally is 'under the radar'. Look carefully and a pattern can be discerned of local CT groups employing a range of workers – schools workers, community liaison workers, workers with the homeless etc – as well as a range of ecumenical chaplaincies which are ways of responding to the needs of the community. New expressions of local ecumenism are often missional.

c) *Inherited church*

19. There was broad agreement that inherited church has a positive value. The liturgical shape of the secular year is still dominated by Christmas and Easter. Historic cathedrals and other historic churches attract thousands to admire, to listen to music, and to worship. Loveday Alexander suggested that we should not dismiss Christendom too glibly, and spoke movingly of the ways in which a clerical collar can

enable pastoral and spiritual conversation. If there is a good side to the inheritance of Christendom, it is that some still have a deep gut feeling that the church is there for them. The dividing line between maintenance and mission is a notoriously hard one to define.

20. Sometimes the most unexpected forms of inherited church release a powerful missional opportunity. The visit of the relics of St Theresa to England evoked a reaction which created a space for the sacred and for reflection on holiness which was totally unexpected. The Catholic church had itself been taken by surprise at the surge of interest.

21. To speak of inherited church in the contexts of both fresh expressions and ecumenism is inevitably to raise questions of money, resources and power. Those are not subjects which we are comfortable with, but a serious, honest discussion is needed.

Mission-shaped and ecumenical – moving forwards

- a) There is a clear mandate to CTE to look again at the range of local ecumenical options and to ensure that a range of modes of engagement is available which can be tailored to specific contexts.
- b) Our language is by definition Protestant / evangelical – all the churches engaged in Fresh Expressions are either Anglican or Protestant. That masks serious ecclesiological questions about the nature and shape of the church. If the conversation about contemporary mission is to reflect the true nature of English Christianity, we need to engage in dialogue with those who are not at this particular table – the Catholics, the Orthodox, and the Pentecostals. The importance of this cannot be overstated, because it is about the catholicity of the church.
- c) We need to find ways of encouraging decision makers who have responsibilities for mission nationally and regionally and those who have control of resources to meet. A good example of such a forum is the Midlands missionaries meeting which is deliberately ecumenical. Underlying this theologically is the whole question of the relationship between the ways in which Christianity spreads and social network theory and ways that might reflect on contemporary mission and ecumenism.⁴
- d) A conversation needs to continue between Fresh Expressions and CTE about the ways in which ecumenism is re-formulating itself around mission. There is the potential to release a creative synergy which would be of considerable benefit to the churches as they seek to make sense of their inherited structures and the context of mission to a complex, increasingly unchurched society.

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¹ For example, recommendation 9 of the Church of England's report *Mission-shaped church* notes 'Local ecumenical co-operation is critical to the Church's mission. Churches need a light touch process that enables local mission experiments and partnerships between Christians of different denominations. A new category of "locally negotiated ecumenical partnerships" (or equivalent terminology) should be created. The introduction of formal ecumenical arrangements should be delayed until the mission initiative has become established.'

² Paul Avis *Re-shaping ecumenical theology: the church made whole?* (London, Continuum 2010) pp 32-38

³ Justo Gonzalez *The changing shape of church history* (St Louis, Missouri, The Chalice Press, 2002)

⁴ Rodney Stark *The rise of Christianity* (Princeton, Princeton University Press 1996); Manuel Castell *The information age* (Oxford, Blackwells, 1999) 3 volumes.