

Anglican-Lutheran Society

Annual General Meeting, 8th March 2014, at Gustaf Adolf Church, Liverpool

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Working Together in the Mission of God in a Post-Christian Society

I did some thinking on Sanctus I (referred to by Peter McGrail). Have you read Douglas Gay's book on The Alternative Worship Movement? I don't think they expected people to pick and mix when they arrived; I think they would argue that their pick and mix happened before they got there, so the liturgy is created by a community of people and that they have picked and mixed from traditions right through church history - so I think that's where they use pick and mix more than when you arrive.

I'm Generation X, not Generation Y. [*The Generations in Britain are loosely defined as: Traditionalist: born prior to 1946; Baby Boomers: born 1946 to the early 1960s; Generation X: born in the early 1960s to the early 1980s; Generation Y or Millennials: born from the early 1980s to the early 2000s; and the Post Millennials: born from 2001-present. Ed*]. I find staggering differences already between me and the next generation. I'm not sure what generations you all are! It's quite interesting how fast we're changing. I would be in the Ben Edson, Ian Mobsby, Johnny Baker bracket and we, and probably Generation Y, are a hinge generation - a lot of the alternative emerging movement that came from being in a hinge generation, moving from one place to another place. I also think we were probably more into the idea of entertainment. The generation of young people that are now growing up are not looking to the Church for entertainment as they've got all the entertainment they need on their i-phone, and we cannot compete with it. You get a lot of Generation X Youth Workers putting on entertainment for Generation Y young people who just go, 'that was naff'. So we keep getting things wrong - what is right for me is likely to be very wrong for someone else.

The big word in mission - and it's not a post-modern word - is the word 'context'. It doesn't matter if I'm travelling to another country or people group or generation or race, I need to understand 'context' or I will make a very bad missionary. I loved walking into this building. I spent two years in Amsterdam's red light district working with 'Youth with a Mission', working with the prostitutes, the homeless, and the drug addicts, and when I walked in upstairs I knew I was in an environment that had been shaped by people other than just the English. Little triggers in my mind said that I was in a different cultural place. Those lessons [of recognition] are the lessons we need now. A lot of our trouble and our struggle with mission is to do with our not understanding culture and context. What I do and say can mean almost the complete opposite in another person's world. So some of the things we can say as a Church can go down really badly with another generation. Even some of the things we think are good, they may think of as bad - and may need debate with them.

Things are speeding up. I read in the newspaper just this week that we have changed again. I live in Wapping, I'm part of a missional community (where I had the maddest prayer meeting on earth the other day), but around me is the hipster culture - beards are on trend, hipster. Hipster was supposed to be about individuality but the crazy thing about expressing yourself and being individual, is that it gets caught onto by other people. In fact, a new movement has begun called 'normcore'. I've just learned about this - it's hot off the press. Normcore is medium, one size fits all culture, the exact opposite of everything that I've just got used to in culture. With normcore you buy an *anorak* with no label and no branding, you buy a medium size t-shirt that does *not* fit you anywhere, you wear jeans that are straight cuts, not skinny, jeans that do not show shape, you wear sneakers that are as bland as possible - bland colour, no name. This has just hit in some of the trendiest places in America and in London.

Suddenly there has been a reaction to the culture that went ahead which said you needed a brand on your trainer in order to be 'in', a designer coat that no-one could possibly afford. So the next generation is reacting against the designer culture. They will not eat artisan bags of crisps - they have the blandest ready salted crisps in the blandest supermarket packet. If I'm going to be a missionary to that group of people I'm going to have to understand what they're reacting against. This is in the middle of where things bubble -

how fast will it take to spread - to wear an M&S (Marks and Spencer, a traditional clothing store) anorak and we all think that's on trend?

I live in a missional community - not all of us live there all the time. There are three of us that live in my home, a warehouse conversion in Wapping, and I bought it because it had lots of space to have lots of people round for a meal. The one thing I have learned about mission in a post-modern world is that food is almost the new Sunday service. Nearly every single thing that's out there that's happening in mission has a meal - Messy Church; to what I'm doing with my friend Shannon who's a missionary from America amongst young adults - it has food in it. Food is a great common denominator and is very good for all-age things. So [in our missional community] we eat a lot of food and we do a lot of drinking and we try to sort out the world's problems. We're not very good at that but we're giving it a shot. We're called a missional community but we're not all Christian. We are Christian, non-Christian and people who used to be Christian. There are days when I say to Shannon, 'you handle the used-to-be Christians, and I'll handle the people who are coming to faith', because, on a daily basis, I find it easier to talk with people who have no faith than the people who've reacted against it.

I had the best prayer meeting I've ever had a while ago. We had a bit of a thing about starting a prayer meeting. Up to now if people wanted to worship in a more formal way, they would go to worship in different churches. A lot of them don't. But I felt we ought to have some place in the space that's not just food, something going on that's more intently Christian.

So we started this prayer meeting. One of the girls was a secular Muslim, who texted and said she was planning to bring one of her friends. Another person was quite shy. I was also going to be Skyping someone in Texas into the prayer meeting. So this was an unlikely group and I wondered whether or not to go ahead. But that is what mission looks like now. It's really complicated. So we went ahead and it was great. The two girls loved the prayer meeting and they want to come back.

We had recently got a group of Fresh Expressions practitioners together from a rural context to discuss how to make new disciples and how to disciple people. We had agreed on three key principles: prayer, passion and mess! So I felt that my prayer meeting fitted extraordinarily well into those categories. We were praying; I was certainly passionate about it; it did feel a little bit messy!

My friend in the USA is someone who is always 'watching the edge', watching the curve to see where changes are taking place. So every conversation with her is fascinating. Then, deep down, I'm an evangelist; I just want people to know and follow Jesus. It's just that half the time I don't know what that's going to look like. My roots are Brethren, I'm now working in the Anglican Church, I have also worshipped in a big American seeker-friendly church in Holland, I went for a short time to the Methodists, I have Pentecostal ancestry - I'm a kind of 'pick and mix', aren't I? All that sometimes makes me think that I'm juggling, and trying to find the best thing in any given setting. And that's probably like a lot of other people who are doing what we call Fresh Expressions.

We've done a very exciting survey, a Church Growth Research Project entitled 'From Anecdote to Evidence' and released by Church House. If I just talk about my prayer meeting, that's just anecdote. Your context might be quite different. In the survey what we tried to do was to see what's happening across our country and what's growing, and what's helping us to grow and what's not helping us to grow. I'm not going to look at all the results, but what we have found out is that there's been a real growth in Fresh Expressions, more so that I had ever imagined. [At this point Rachel showed some PowerPoint slides giving details of Church attendance]

At a maximum in the Church of England we have 2-3% of the population attending church as regular attenders - 'regular' meaning once a month. If we add in all other denominations church-going on this semi-regular basis is around 10% of the population. This is like going to the doctor for a health check and then going to do something about what we've been told.

The National Census gives a better picture. A lot of people tick 'Christian', but I don't know when you last had a conversation with one of those people. Probably quite regularly, actually! You quickly realise that their version of Christianity and your version are quite different.

The next set of statistics show the 'generational slide'. I attended the Porvoo Contact Group recently and I realise that many of you in the member Lutheran Churches have a much greater opportunity around Confirmation than we do in the Church of England. You get an unprecedented moment with young people around 14 years of age to have an impact on their lives that we in England have lost.

We have lost Christendom in the UK, and the younger people are the further the churches have fallen off the radar. If you ask English people around 20 years of age what religion they are the majority fall in the 'No Religion' category. That doesn't mean they're not spiritual, it means they've no religious affiliation. Some may claim a spirituality, but they definitely don't want to belong to any of the classic religions.

I would really like to know the extent to which people change their opinions after the age of around 26 years or whether, as Peter suggested, they are going to go through life as 'consumers'. Our survey suggests that people tend to stick for the rest of their lives with the conclusions they reached in their 20s about faith. Why is that important? Even in Church House people say to me, 'Don't worry, Rachel, they will come back when they're sixty!' I want to respond that they can't 'come back' because they were never with us, and that statistically that just doesn't wash. People don't come back when they're sixty. It's all down to reading the statistics, You could think that all the people we have turned up when they were sixty because we have a lot of churchgoers aged sixty and upwards. But if you read it like that it simply doesn't hold true because people are formed as young adults. After that it gets harder and harder to reach them. It's almost as if people solidify in what they think and how they believe. It's not that we can't reach them. We can. But for some time now we have been losing the under-20 age group so that now we have lost the majority of the under-40s in England. This means that in this country we require an incredible missionary endeavour.

Missionary endeavour requires a careful understanding of context, and that's what Fresh Expressions tries to do. There are two big drop-off points. Children drop off at around 14 years of age, while others drop off at the young adult stage. So we need to think carefully and work hard at how we deal with people around both those points. So at Church House we have a cracking young adults round table, young people who are committed to reaching their generation, which is something I find so exciting because they've got the passion and they understand the context far better than me.

Another interesting statistic is that 91% of children of two non-believing parents don't believe. So when you remember that most 20 year olds don't believe the odds are that when they have children those children won't believe either, statistically speaking. Fortunately we have a great big God who can do amazing things, but we really do have to try to understand where we're at. We used to have Church at the heart of society. That was Christendom. Everyone to be part of society had to be baptised into Christianity. We obviously don't have that any more. We live in a Post-Christendom world in England, where the majority of people are unbelieving.

If you have two believing parents there's a 46% chance that you will believe. If you have one believing parent there's a 20% chance that you will believe. So young people are half as religious as their parents, and if that's kept going you can see where it leads!

So we've got this amazing missionary opportunity. In the past we've relied on one method – attraction. We've tried to get people to come to us. In Britain we still do this a bit. We have 'Back to Church Sunday', run by Paul Bayes, the Bishop of Hertford. This is great for the people who once were with us. But you can't ask people to come back to something they were never part of. So, while this approach will reach some of our generations very effectively, the big question is, when they get there, will they find it a place they want to be? There is a whole generation of people who are never going to come back.

Today we are working across our traditions in this country in ways that we have never done before. I just want to add at this point that the Anglican Church is leading the way. That's very exciting. So there are many people engaging in mission together. I visited a little town called Eastley, near Southampton, and I saw

in the congregation people right across the spectrum from the Black Pentecostal Church to the Roman Catholic Church. We were all in this room together to plan mission together this year. What's so good about that is that in a world that has become fragmented there's a very powerful message being conveyed when the Christian denominations come together in mission. I don't think that town will be the same after this year.

But whenever this kind of thing happens I think that everyone is, deep down, hoping that people will come back to church. It is the attractive model that is barely concealed. Whereas, the joy of Fresh Expressions is that we go and we stay and we see what happens when we've got there. It's much more missionary, like arriving in a new country, in a new culture and a new context and giving birth to Christian community in that place. You pray, then you look at context, you make connections, you listen, and then often things start with some kind of loving service. In our community the loving service is giving people the chance to serve others. A lot of young adults in today's world want to do good in the wider world, and they actually want a group of people to do that with. So we provide a group of people to change the world a bit because that is something they really want to do. That approach is extraordinarily attractive to the younger folk in our society. It doesn't matter what their belief is, that's not the question. What they want to do is to change the world. We have formed community around this aspiration, and then we've tried to make disciples, and that's the challenge – to help people to follow Jesus in their context and in their generation. And it's another huge challenge to work out how we do worship appropriately in that context. It's an incredible journey to be on.

So what has happened so far? A review of ten Church of England Dioceses showed that Fresh Expressions has added 10% to church attendance in those dioceses. So we've calculated that the membership of a medium sized diocese has been added to the Church of England through these new congregations, these new ecclesial communities, whatever you want to call them. Of these new congregations or communities, 40% have been started in the past three years. So it is a new movement that is growing. For every one person that goes to start one of these new churches 2.5 new people join. That is a 250% growth rate. That's staggering. If you go with the Gospel, which is something mentioned at the end of Matthew's Gospel, into a new context and a new place and grow you are likely to get 250% growth rate. So 25% of our Fresh Expressions' attenders are Christians, 35% are people who had left the Church but have come back as a result of the Fresh Expression, 40% are people who had never before been reached. That's cracking! Add to that, 52% are led by the laity of whom 40% so far have no formal training. So we're looking at something of a revolution. Our job as 'ordinary' church members is to catch up with that revolution and find out how we can help, how we can recognise those people, how we can see them as part of the Church, how might we offer more appropriate training. The Diocese of Leicester has done a really good job of training lay pioneers, licensing them and holding them in a network that has kept and supported them. So they are much more a part of the Church, and feel part of it and encouraged. The average size of a Fresh Expression is 39 people, so we are looking at a plethora of small Christian communities. The average team that goes out as pioneer ministers is 3-12 people. They come from all traditions within our church, and have taken pieces of their tradition with them. They often mirror the make-up of the diocese, so if there are more rural areas in the diocese there will be more rural Fresh Expressions.

If you want to learn more about how to reach young adults there is a marvellous report called 'Authentic Faith' and it would really help you. It identifies some key things in reaching young adults: they are looking for real community where they can know one another deeply; they want it to be authentic so that they can bring their real life and who they are; they often want food; they are looking for a community of doubt, where they are allowed to bring their questions and uncertainties; they want it to be spiritual.

And it's time for me to stop.

In questions following her presentation Rachel was asked if Café Church is a Fresh Expression. She replied that it depends on whether the aim of the founders is to remain in the café or to try to get people to come into church! If what happens in the café is 'church' and there's no desire to get the members to come on Sunday to the 'regular' church, then it's a Fresh Expression. Costa (a coffee shop chain) and Fresh Expressions are working very well together! It's brilliant, she said, because Costa is a familiar space whereas a lot of church space is completely unfamiliar. Costa is on the high street where everybody goes. It's ideal.

Another questioner expressed anxiety that Fresh Expressions are not really building the Church, but rather a penumbra of good will of the sort that we used to be able to bank on because people attended Church of England Sunday School. Whilst every organisation needs this kind of good will, if we say that this is 'growing the church' we might be deceiving ourselves. Rachel responded that some of the people involved come to a very clear faith, whilst others have not as yet. She had suggested that the hardest job, and the greatest challenge, was to make new disciples. We are good at loving service and growing communities, but every Fresh Expression should have as its aim that people will put their hands up and say, 'I am a Christian.' A lot of people will turn up to Costa and 'dabble', but how many will discover Jesus Christ who can transform their lives?

Someone else, speaking from experience, spoke of the fall-off in faith among those who come to faith as young people but somehow lose it ten years later. Rachel urged us to examine the research in 'From Anecdote to Evidence' because it is very thorough. There is also the issue of what we mean by 'Church', and for some of us 'Anglican Church'. In Fresh Expressions this is expressed in terms of 'relationship to the bishop'. There is a similar fall-out of children and young adults from what we call 'normal church'. The issue of true discipleship is the important issue that faces all churches, 'normal' and 'Fresh Expressions'. All too often we don't have disciples. We have people who quite like coming to this thing on Sunday. Some have deep faith which transforms and informs their lives. Others have never got past the stage of 'I enjoy turning up to this thing on Sunday'. The question we should be asking of every church community is 'Are you making disciples?' She told of a friend who had started a Skateboard Church. She gave up her own preferred choice of church to work with ten year olds who congregated at the Skateboard Park. Ten years on some of them are now 20 years old and leading that church. That's a good example of what the aims should be and how long the investment.