

Loving God, Living Church

*Church for people who believe
that God really does
love the world*

Mark Norridge



Salt & Light Ministries

Copyright © Mark Norridge 2010

First published 2010
by Salt and Light Ministries
All rights reserved

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, photocopying or otherwise, without the prior written consent of the publisher.

Unless otherwise marked Scripture quotations taken from the Holy Bible,
New International Version Anglicised Copyright © 1979, 1984
By International Bible Society.
Used by permission of Hodder & Stoughton Publishers, a division of Hodder
Headline Ltd.
All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked NLT are taken from the Holy Bible, New Living
Translation, copyright 1996, 2004.
Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Wheaton, Illinois 60189.
All rights reserved

Scripture quotations marked The Message. Copyright © 1993, 1994, 1995, 1996,
2000, 2001, 2002.
Used by permission of NavPress Publishing Group.

ISBN 1 901075 22 2

Editor: Mike Beaumont
Oxford, UK

Contents

Introduction	5
Chapter 1 A Missionary God?	11
Chapter 2 Missional People: New Thinking	21
Chapter 3 Embodying God: If you have seen me you have seen the Father	31
Chapter 4 Becoming Human: Complete Identification.....	45
Chapter 5 So, what about Church Planting?	65
Conclusion How then should we live?	77

Introduction

“I wouldn’t ever go to church, but I like the fact that it is there.” That’s what a friend of mine said to me as we sat relaxing on a sunny patio drinking homemade elderflower cordial. It was the kind of setting that made for good honest conversation. I guess she was probably referring to church buildings, but it was a comment that seemed to quite accurately reflect how many people in the UK would think of church at large. Yet it was more like the way you might think of an old couple who live across the street that you wave to every morning, but never speak to; or a neighbour’s dog that you politely pat, hoping desperately that it won’t jump up and lick you this time! She was expressing an appreciation of a connection to history, so often lost in the drive for forward progress, and yet an uncertainty of what they might do to you and what their true intent is.

When you think about that statement from the other side, it sounds not a little patronising, especially for a community of people who feel that they are entrusted with a message that is intended to change the world. Yet it tells us something: that things are moving and changing, that we find ourselves in a culture that seems to be reconfiguring itself even as we watch. It seems that many of the fixed points that anchored the church at the centre of society were located on the fault lines of a moving cultural landscape.

The signs of this movement are easy to see in the national church attendance figures that have shown a drop of over 15% in the last 10 years. This decline was announced in a book entitled *Pulling out of the nose dive*, which also boldly announced that “not every denomination dropped in numbers of those attending church”. A positive message indeed! Many of us will have experienced this in other ways. A member of our church was studying Religious Education A level. She was very surprised as the course got onto the book of Genesis. The teacher asked the class who knew the story of Adam and Eve and only 3 of the 12 students put their hands up. Fortunately this was just enough to act out the story for the rest of the class (not a full-costumed performance though!).

The changes are much larger than the church, of course. We can see huge changes in the way family life works. The increase in divorce and an increase in people not getting married or delaying getting married has resulted in smaller average household sizes and a huge increase in housing requirements. The changes in family make-up can cause complications in when and where and for how long people see their children. There have been changes in working practices, with more people working more hours, increasing the pressure on ‘spare time’ outside of work. We have seen a change in our expectations in terms of our possessions; the demand for more comforts adding pressure to income and debt. Leisure time is an added factor here, with an increase in gym membership, but a decrease in commitment to clubs and societies across the board. The numbers of hours that we spend watching TV and being on-line however

continues to increase. These and many other factors deeply affect how people interact and find friendships, how people view their time and how they view what is necessary and important.

The loss of familiar surroundings and clear fixed points can be very disorientating and unsettling. If we look back, say, 30 years (with 20-20 vision), we would see a church clear in its mission: to rediscover and to call a wider culture back to true Christianity. In the words of Keith Green, we wanted people to see that “going to church doesn’t make you a Christian any more than going to McDonalds makes you a hamburger”. But what happens when as today, the people have never been in a church gathering and whatever happened there would be as foreign as entering a mosque.

The truth is that our cultural landscape is changing. The challenge is to find what it means to be the church in a new setting. In particular, for this book, what it means to be the church in terms of discovering what the mission of the church should be.

Rethinking Mission

Not far from where I am writing this in Northampton William Carey set up the first missions society. He realised that the great exploratory advancements of Western Europe into Africa and India were opening up interactions with new kinds of people (“pagans, heathens, uncivilised”). In his first book *Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians, To Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathens* published in 1792, he explored the reasons why it was essential to take the gospel to these people.

For example, this is his reason to go to them despite “their uncivilised and barbarous way of living”:

“...this [uncivilised way of living] can be no objection to any, except those whose love renders them unwilling to expose themselves to inconveniences for the good of others ... it is no objection to commercial people. It only requires that we should have as much love to the souls of our fellow-creatures and fellow sinners as they have for the profits arising from a few otter-skins ... after all the uncivilised state of the heathen instead of affording an objection against preaching the gospel to them, ought to furnish an argument for it. Can we as men, or as Christians, hear that a great part of our fellow creatures, whose souls are as immortal as ours, and who are as capable as ourselves of adorning the gospel ... would not the spread of the gospel be the most effectual means of their civilization?”

Carey is regarded as the father of modern missions, and his mantra, “attempt great things for God, expect great things from God” is often quoted. We may look back and decide that some of the methods employed at various point in Christians mission were not the best, and we can also see with great clarity how the gospel has been influenced with the cultural goal of civilising barbarians. However what is most clear is that mission has always been part of the package. God is constantly working within his people to get them to look beyond the immediate. Great heroes of the faith such as Carey, who did not settle for the ordinary, are a challenge to us whatever our context.

However part of this heritage is that it is easy to see mission as something that happens somewhere else. The work to see the gospel take root in a new culture is one that happens overseas. Bishop Lesslie Newbigin was well known for his mission work in India where he worked for 30 years. But it was when he returned to the UK that his influence on mission began in a new way. What he gained on returning to the western world was a new perspective on things here. He realised that the western world had shifted. Church and Christianity were no longer central to society in the way that they once were. He saw that the West was now a mission field, in the same way that Africa or India was seen as once seen by Carey. His concern was that the church had not adapted to its new situation, the church had not embraced that it was on mission in its own country. That was back in 1974 and certainly things have only continued in the same direction since then.

We have already mentioned the example of church attendance as evidence for this, but we should particularly note that the largest drop is for those in the 20s age bracket. These are the generation who have grown up in the increasingly 'post-Christian' world that Newbigin observed. If we project this forward the consequences for churches generally is very scary. But the church attendance statistic for this generation is only a sign of the broader issue: a culture where church is more and more one voice amongst many. For better or for worse that is where we are, and it certainly is not reversing. The question is, then, what happens when the church finds itself in this situation as one amongst many, broadly ignored in a culture that no longer values

Christian things just because they are Christian? The good news is that the gospel is very used to this environment, and it is where it started: a small group of people in an upper room, with a 'religious' community on the one hand and a vast empire on the other.

Our task then is to take seriously the missions-context in which we find ourselves in the West. Cross-cultural mission is no longer something that just happens "elsewhere" to people from other nations, the challenge of cross-cultural mission is on our doorstep, between us and our neighbours. The task then is to rethink mission, from something that the church does (in sending members to places or activities), to understanding that the church herself is in fact sent.

This is a new challenge for us. Is the church ready for this strange new world? Is it equipped to be Jesus' church when things are so different to what it has been used to. Does it have anything to say in this new context?

What we do know is that the gospel speaks to all peoples. The first disciples were charged to go to all languages and peoples, and went to many, many people. The gospel is able to speak into all cultures, all places. That is the starting point of faith on a journey of discovery into what it means to be church in the 21st Century.

Chapter 1

A Missionary God?

If you have been anywhere in the Christian world recently, you will most likely have come across the word ‘missional’. It seems that it can get tagged onto anything, ‘missional church’, ‘missional community’, and particularly in the title for the latest conferences. I even saw an advert the other day for ‘missional nursing’! As with any ‘latest’ word, everyone wants to adopt it to describe themselves and what they are doing! So what is ‘missional’ about and what is it trying to express?

A Missional God

When we think of what it means to be the church, we must be rooted in who God is, what God has done and is doing. God, after all, is the reason the church exists at all, as the people of God. As we get clearer about what God is like, we begin to understand what God’s mission is, and from that we can get right what the church should be like and should be doing.

How are we to think of God’s mission? Let’s start with one of the most famous verses in the Bible and pause it halfway through:

“For God so loved the world that he sent...”

This is the bedrock for understanding God as a missional God. When we as Christians use the word ‘God’, we mean the Trinity, a community of three persons, Father, Son, Spirit. And God is Love. We are not talking here about a community of Love that is turned in on itself, enjoying being together, rather annoyed by a world that has turned from its creator, with crossed arms and tapping feet like an annoyed parent waiting for a contrite return. No! The Love of God is an outward impulse constantly reaching and drawing in, self-sacrificing, generous to a world that does not deserve it. The driving, loving impulse of the God of Love leads to sending action.

Therefore any talk of mission must always start with God. Mission is not our work, nor our idea; it is rooted in God’s prior activity and movement. In fact it would be right to say that mission is an attribute of God’s character. God’s action of mission in reaching out to a world that has rejected him is shown in God’s self-giving movement and acts of love. Any kind of mission roots itself firmly in the Love of God.

This is the first reason to use the word missional: it reminds us that we are joining with God in what he is doing. In other words, God’s church doesn’t have a mission, God’s mission has a church.

So, when we talk about a missional church we are first of all saying that mission is not a side activity of a community. Rather, instead we are saying that we as a community are caught up with the mission of God. ‘Missional’ turns mission from a noun to an adjective: from something that is done, to a way of being. Like swimming in a fast-flowing river, we have been caught up

by this active self-giving, moving Love, and it takes us with it.

What is God's Mission?

It is appropriate to start our answer to this question, as is so often the case, with the creation story in Genesis. Genesis 1-3 tells of God's creative action in the world. It tells of God's love for his creation, with his repeated pronouncements: "*it was good.*" Even after the first five days of plants and shrubs, land and water, birds and animals, God was not content with creation. On the sixth day he created humanity. Not just as a pinnacle of his creative work, but as co-worker and a friend. Humanity was to be God's image-bearer in creation. They were to manage the rest of creation as the Creator intended. Humanity, as God's image, represented God to creation. They were not owners of creation, but stewards of it.

Therefore humanity has a mission from God to steward creation as the creator wants, a mission to fill the earth with the God's image for creation. This mission could be broken down into three areas:

Communion with God

Humanity is created for communion with God, to know him, to "*walk with him in the cool of the day*". We are called to live in the reality of that relationship, to enjoy it, and to experience it. Humanity is able to be God's image on the earth because it flowed from relationship with the creator. That relationship was lost to all humanity in the Fall.

Community with each other

Humanity is built for relationships. One man on his own was no good! No companion was found for Adam amongst the animals, so God made “*flesh after [his] flesh*”. Humanity enjoyed clear, open, healthy relationships amongst themselves. After the Fall, these kind of relationships were lost. The individual’s self-understanding was also altered, now experiencing shame.

Co-creativity

God’s work in Creation comes to some kind of conclusion on the seventh day. In Genesis 2, this ‘work’ is described as one of a skilled craftsman. There is, however, still further ‘work’ required: “*no plant of the field had yet sprung up ... for there was no man to work the ground*” (yes, work is pre-Fall!). The word for ‘work’ here is different though, and the implication is this: that creation only fulfils its full creative intent when mankind works in conjunction with God, serving, worshipping and honouring him, by working his creation to enable it to fulfil its potential. Post-Fall, work took on a cursed nature of being hard and hindered.

Adam and Eve’s mission was to fill the earth with a ‘true’ humanity like this, that lives in communion with God, in community with each other, and expresses co-creativity with God. They were to fill the earth with the rule of God through his image – a rule that is not oppressive or domineering but that releases creativity and potential. The Fall resulted from people’s decision to forsake God and build their own kingdom instead. People

decided to run things their own way, and in effect to become like gods. The 'true humanity' vision soon slipped into a 'false humanity', a corrupted humanity, a tainted image. It turned into a ruling kingdom that demonstrated division, domination and destruction; corruption of and within creation.

God's representative people started with Adam and Eve, who decided to build their own kingdom instead of God's. The Bible tells us that God then chose Noah and his family. Then in Genesis 12, God chose Abraham. With Abraham we find the promise of a start of a new people of God, again designed to be God's representatives on the earth. God made a covenant with Abraham that was to set the scene for the whole biblical story that was to follow:

*I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I
will make your name great, and you will be a blessing.
(Genesis 12:2)*

All that God was going to do with Abraham and his family was to be a blessing to the whole world. Eventually God gave them a gracious gift, the Law, to give guidance to all aspects of their communal and personal lives. The Law was not just to govern their communion with God, but also to redefine a model people, a people able to demonstrate the character of God to the surrounding peoples. The intent was that they were to bless the nations and be a light for the whole world.

Towards the end of the Old Testament we find that the nation of Israel had lost what it meant to be faithful to God and his plan for them. As a result they found themselves in exile, away from the land God had

promised. But the dream of being the people God had intended, and the sense of calling and mission, had not been lost.

God began to speak through his prophet Isaiah about a Servant who would come. The prophetic visions about this servant are called 'the Servant Songs' and are in Isaiah 40-55. In Isaiah's Servant Songs we see captured the dream and promise of the restoration of God's people. Isaiah's vision sees this people as those who are faithful amongst a people who are unfaithful. God's people are now a remnant, true Israel in the midst of an unfaithful nation. In these songs true, faithful Israel is embodied in the 'the Servant'. Within the core of these prophetic visions lies the renewed promise of a people who would be a light to the nations, and who would be the sign of new creation for the whole of creation. The dream of God fulfilling his redemption plan is restored: a new heavens and a new earth.

The Servant is to bring justice, express concern for the weak, bring freedom for captives and sight to the blind. And this justice and deliverance is to be brought to the whole earth:

*It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth.
(Isaiah 49:6)*

We can see that the Servant also embodies God's deliverance for his creation. Once again God's original plan for who Israel should be is reflected in the Servant. Israel understood that they were representing God's true

reign on the earth, they were part of God's plan to restore his image on the earth, and this image was to bring restoration and blessing for the whole of creation. It is here in the Servant Songs that we get an indication of the way in which this victorious reign would come about. It was to be through submission to suffering and evil, and through identification with the weak and the powerless.

From Isaiah then, we can see that the Servant takes on two roles. Firstly he takes on the role of true, faithful Israel and secondly he takes the role of God's Deliverer. It is not too long into the Gospels and other New Testament writings before we see that Jesus is The Servant that Isaiah was writing about. The ministry of Jesus fulfils this dual intention: the representation and embodiment (incarnation) of God's saving activity through the utter identification with and care for those who are being delivered, even to the point of suffering their fate. To demonstrate to the world not only the reality of what God is like but also to reveal what Israel should truly have been like and more broadly what humanity should truly have been like.

This gives us a two-fold picture that can help us understand the incarnation, that of embodying God and identifying completely with humanity. Even more than that, we see in the incarnation not only actions, but the model for a way of being: Jesus came modelling what the community of true Israel should have been, and therefore he came modelling what true humanity should be, as the first fruits of new creation.

These thoughts are central to the Christian Way. Jesus called people to follow him, to become disciples. The

early disciples, in line with their Jewish heritage, understood that Jesus was not founding a new religion, but a new way of living and of being God's people: God's representative missional image on the earth. In following Jesus, and experiencing God's redemptive work, this same people were beginning to express being that true humanity themselves. Their concern was not a worry about a personal post-mortem destination, but being part of God's climatic, redemptive new-creation action.

All mission must hold this 'new creation dream' as its central tenet in order for it to be caught up in God's mission. The ultimate goal of mission is peoples on the earth living out the reality of what it means to true humanity, living out the reality of communion with God, community with each other and entering into co-creativity with God. This action will be brought to a wonderful completion on Jesus' return. The 'new creation' work, started in the incarnation and continued by the work of the Spirit who has caught up the people of God in it, will bring about a final transformation of God's people and of the whole of the cosmos.

Being Missional

Mission starts with God. God is a missionary! It is expressed in his very nature as we understand the incarnation: the love of God was the driving impulse to move towards a lost and hurting world. The church therefore does not generate mission for God, the church gets caught up with the mission of God. It gets caught up in this movement, and finds itself not as the static partner that occasionally sends people out, but as a sent people who reflect the very character of God.

God's mission is reflected right through the biblical story. It is constantly clear that God calls a people together for a purpose beyond themselves. The end purpose is not a bigger group of people, as if the community themselves was the reason for the mission, but the whole of creation reflecting the creator's purpose and intent. Humanity has a three-fold purpose expressed right from the start in Genesis. Those three purposes are still the guiding principles for what God wants from humanity.

The emphasis on the word 'missional' is important in expressing this idea. Mission is more than a noun, a thing, or an activity performed by the brave few. Rather it is an adjective, a word that describes something, that expresses more about its nature and purpose. Missional church reminds us that the church should reflect the nature and character of the God who brought it into being, that the church is caught up with the impulse and movement that started in the heart of the Godhead. It pulls us forward with him for the sake of the world.

Questions

1. How would you now define the word 'missional'?
2. In what sense is God a missionary?
3. To what extent do you feel caught up in the mission of God as an individual or as a church?
4. How would you describe what God is after in the world?

Chapter 2

Missional People: New Thinking

The Tale of Two Pubs

Pub 1: The Hamilton Hotel, Hamilton, Australia

The local paper reported it like this:

Patrons of the Hamilton hotel will soon be offered a spirit of a different kind. In an unusual conversion, the town's Baptist congregation – who are teetotallers – have taken over one of the six pubs in the town.

This congregation bought a pub that was right on the town's main street. They took it over, cleared it out and converted it into a church and conference centre. The front bar they turned into a kids' play area and the dance floor was turned into a chapel. This old pub was now well and truly an alcohol free zone! The church were understandably excited, and felt that they were being innovative, creative and daring. Not everyone was quite so enthusiastic, however. Farmer Bruce McKenzie, 71, said he would miss his old place at the bar where everyone had their own

place. Previously the pub had been a gathering point for farmers, tradesman and business people.

Pub 2: Cock & Bottle, Bradford

The Cock & Bottle is a Grade 2 listed, two-storey pub at the bottom of a street on the corner of Bradford's inner ring road. After a rather sad and chequered history, including being the scene of a murder, it has been rented by the Bradford Christian Pub Consortium. Reverend Robin Gamble, a key member of the project said, "We wanted to acquire a pub and run it as a Christian pub. That means it will be a cracking good local pub with a warm welcome, really high standards and be very friendly and part of the community." An experienced landlord, Malcolm Willis has been employed to manage the pub. He and his wife live upstairs. He said: "Jesus said go into all the world. And this includes pubs. He didn't say sit in your church and wait for people to come to you." The Christian staff set about creating a loving, welcoming environment, where locals are cared for, listened to and ministered to. It is in the listening that they see opportunities to pray for people. Willis says: "I think Jesus would have been here in the pubs."

These two stories are interesting examples of two approaches to mission. Now clearly every story is more complicated than a paragraph on a page, but let's use what we have to think about the two models.

In the first, the locals are moved out and the church moves in. The church takes over the public place, cleans it out, and creates a sanctified religious zone. There is a felt benefit of having this zone on the main street, with a strong sense of power and influence. Although there may be some innovation here, the thinking behind it is the same as that of the traditional church building. The move involves drawing lines between the sacred and the profane, expecting people to move into the church space and of influencing from a place of power.

Conversely, in the second pub the church moves into the heart of the surrounding community and it does it in a way that people relate to and understand. It doesn't draw lines over what is sacred and what is not, but it expects to see God working with people where they are, in their lives. It expects that in the course of forming genuine loving relationships with people, that their lives will be impacted and changed by the love of God. It uses the means of serving people, quite literally, rather than a position of power. It is also pretty risky!

Is your Church a Department Store?

We have started this chapter with an example of different thinking to try and get us to think about our own categories of what mission looks like. So let's tease that out a little bit more and make some bold statements.

The church doesn't exist for itself. The church doesn't exist to create a nice life for its members. It is not there to provide nice Sunday morning experiences, entertaining activities for the children, and a cosy community with no eyes to the world outside. The

church is a church not for itself, but it is for God. It is God's church, for his purposes and for his glory.

We must have a sense of God and his mission. The mission is not for the saving of the church, it is not to make the church bigger and better. Jesus said that if you want to save your life, you will lose it. The route to fruitfulness according to Jesus was to give up self-protection and instead give up our 'self' for his sake. We should not do mission to increase our church attendance, sending people out to get people in. If we do that we have our own mission and we are not caught up with the mission of God.

The consequence of having our own mission in this way is that church becomes the Christian equivalent of a department store. It is judged on how well it serves its members and how well it gets brand loyalty, having departments covering all tastes and ages. It is a "vendor of religious goods and services", as one person put it, recruiting people to make a consumer choice for its products. What means can be justified for that end? At this point the gospel becomes personal and private, with no relevance beyond the individual who subscribes.

The church is not an end in itself; rather it is the community of people who have given their allegiance to King Jesus, working together for the good of his kingdom. Mission cannot be limited to the benefits felt within church, or the numbers of attendees. The goal of this mission is not individuals signing on the dotted line, but a community of people together called to live under the rule of a new king.

The mission of this people is not to send a few people, but rather to understand themselves as ‘The Sent’. In Jesus’ words at the end of John’s gospel, “*just as the Father sent me, so I send you*”. With those words Jesus’ disciples become Jesus’ apostles, the sent ones. Jesus was clear: in the same way that he was sent from the Father, to enter this world, to become a man for the sake of people, so it is their job to continue that movement. The baton is being passed on. It is no wonder that Jesus then breathes on them the empowering Spirit, to enable them to do all that he is asking of them.

This baton that is passed on is the apostolic impulse that Jesus commissioned his church with, it is the apostolic impulse that has propelled the church forward through many centuries. It is the apostolic impulse that encourages us to see our culture as a mission field. To see ourselves as communities caught up in the mission of God and thrust forward, outward, such that church recovers its apostolic dimension.

I remember very clearly the morning I had invited someone I didn’t know that well to speak at our church. He got up and opened his sermon by saying, “Isn’t it great that Jesus isn’t here?” There was a deathly silence across the meeting as we digested his statement, trying to decide whether we had heard him correctly. Just to make sure we had, he repeated it again, this time more enthusiastically, with that raised tone that clearly anticipated a response, “Isn’t it great that Jesus isn’t here?” Silence. Unimpressed by our lack of yeses and amens, he turned to rebuke. “Well, Jesus thinks so.” Three things were passing through my mind at great speed: (1) how do I get the microphone off him; (2) who

in the congregation I would need to apologise to first, and (3) what on earth could he be going on about! Finally he got to the point: “Jesus said this: it is better for you that I go.”

Aha! Relief! He was right. Jesus knew what he was doing. Jesus knew it was much better that the life and mission of God he represented was not limited to one man in one time and space. If Jesus goes, another will be sent, the Holy Spirit, to bring the life and mission of God into the hearts of every man, woman and child who would receive him. As these people are formed into communities, as they are sent throughout the world, they continue the mission of Jesus wherever they go.

It is great that Jesus isn't here because we have the Holy Spirit living within us. Every single one of us has access to Jesus through his Spirit and we don't have to push through the crowds just to touch the hem of his garment.

It is great that Jesus isn't here because the mission of Jesus is multiplied through all ages and all people as it becomes a reality in the church. People of the world can experience the love of God as they encounter the church wherever they are. This is the body of Christ, in some senses, a continuation of the Incarnation. The church is the arms and feet of Jesus, doing what he would do, going where he would go.

The great beauty of that image of the church as the body of Christ, as Paul draws out so effectively in 1 Corinthians 12, is that this mission is not about high-profiled individuals. One person cannot accurately and effectively be the body of Christ; rather it takes many people of many shapes and sizes. For a body to work it

must have many parts, all finding their place, all finding their function, with great diversity and great unity.

This is why it is absolutely crucial to see mission and community as two sides of the same coin. They are not competing in importance, or competing for emphasis; rather the body of Christ is mission in the world, as a community, because it exists. The real question is, what is the body of Christ doing? The only real way in which people can see that the Gospel is true, that it is effective in lives, and truly makes a difference is by seeing and experiencing the church, a group of people drawn together by their common allegiance to Jesus. The people who through that allegiance have found their lives transformed express the Gospel's true reality in the way that they live it out together.

James Krabill, from the Mennonite Mission Network, says that some churches *smell* like mission and some don't. By this I think that he means that the ability to affirm that a church is 'missional' is not necessarily indicated just by what activity they get up to or what they say; it is more subtle than that. It smells like it in the same way you can smell garlic in a meal; you know when it is there (and when you have eaten it!), but you can't pick it out and put it to one side, it infiltrates everything. He says that there are four different types of congregation:

- those with little mission emphasis;
- those who undertake occasional mission projects;
- those who have a regular mission program;
- and finally those who have mission as the organising factor.

It is the last one that he is searching for, but rarely finds, or smells! When he does find it, he sees that everyone in that church community, whatever role they perform, job they do or gifting they have, see themselves as participating in expressing God's Kingdom to the world outside their community.

For this to happen we need to get things in the right order. It is so tempting to get the church to tinker with projects and initiatives, and import the latest church model. It is also tempting to jump headlong into meeting the needs of the local community. Whilst all of those may be helpful, for a mission-smelling church we must start with God, who he is and what he is like. From that we start to look at what he is after, and how his mission should be brought about in the world. And it is in the light of both of those that we begin to look at the church, our church life, our ways and patterns of meeting, our organisational structures and our programmes. The point is that none of these are fixed; rather they are to be discerned from an understanding of God and his mission.

Mission is not primarily an activity, but it is a way of living. It is part of our DNA as God's people.

Humanity's Mission is God's Mission

In these two chapters we have laid out a framework for understanding the mission of God. This is also the mission for humanity. The three-fold purpose indicates who humanity was to be. All three were seriously disrupted at the Fall. All three have been addressed in Jesus.

Communion with God

“God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself” (2 Corinthians 5:19). Because of Jesus we can enjoy open relationship with God. By finding our security, identity and belonging in this primary relationship with God all the rest of life falls into place. We can also invite others to experience it too! We can challenge their rejection, and invite them to plug into the true source of life. We can be the way in which others find the ultimate fulfilment of life with God.

Community with each other

“There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” (Galatians 3:28). In Christ all human divisions and discrimination are removed. All the barriers to human relationships can be dealt with, including individuals' self-issues. We can live in the reality of that, as we allow Jesus to help. We can also work to help others, whether for the individual or for interpersonal relationships. This can work on the level of work teams through to national division! We can work to value the individual where others have discarded them. We can work to restore relationships where they are

broken. We can work to make relationships work smoothly and effectively.

Co-creativity with God

“Creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God.” (Romans 8:21) In Christ all of creation is destined to be renewed. We can enjoy that now as we work to enable creation to fulfil all the potential that God has invested in it. That can be the release of medicines, the making of materials, working the land, the designing and building of structures, creative arts, etc.

Questions

Think about each of the three areas in turn and compare them to all the areas of your life (work, home, leisure, church etc). Let it be a framework for thinking about God’s mission in and through your life.

1. How are you fulfilling each of these purposes?
2. How you are addressing the effects of the Fall in each of these purposes?
3. What does it mean to have mission as the organising factor in a church?
4. In what ways can a church have its own mission rather than God’s?
5. To what extent do you agree that we should not do mission simply to increase church attendance? What are your reasons?

Chapter 3

Embodying God:

If you have seen me you have seen the Father

The story is told of a young child who has settled down to do some drawing at the dining table. The paper is all laid out and a pen is at the ready. Mum is there looking over the child's shoulder. "What are you going to draw?" she asks. "God," the child confidently replies. Trying to keep a straight face, mum enquires, in the kindest possible way, "How are you going to do that, dear? No one knows what God looks like." Without skipping a beat the child replies, "Well they will when I have finished!"

How are we to know what God is like? After all we cannot physically see him, touch him or feel him. Well, Jesus said the most amazing thing: if you want to know what God is like, look at me. In fact Jesus said it even more directly than that: "*If you have seen me, you have seen the Father.*"

God coming as a man in Jesus, that is, the incarnation, is the ultimate expression of God's mission. The incarnation is the culmination of God's purposes in the world and the pivotal point in history. Therefore I am convinced that the incarnation is key to our

understanding of mission and consequently key to our understanding of church as well. We must place a clear understanding of the incarnation, its principles and practice, at the core of our thinking. I do not mean understanding what Jesus said and did, although that is also central; I mean starting with the fact that God came in this way at all! This missionary God of Love's most excellent solution was to express that love by coming as a man. This is nothing less than surprising. It was surprising for 1st Century Israel, it was surprising for Jesus' disciples, it is surprising for us. This very action therefore shows us not only the reality of that love, but also the nature of the love and of the Lover. Marshall McLuhan has famously said: "The medium is the message", implying that the means of communicating the message contains a message itself. If this really is the case, then our efforts to communicate God's love to God's world can take no higher form than that which God himself employed. We can start to talk then about an 'incarnational mission' and an 'incarnational church'.

It is this idea of being an incarnational church with an incarnational mission that I want to focus on. This idea needs picking up and playing with, it needs moving around and looking at from a number of different angles. In this chapter I want to look at three aspects of what it means to 'embody God'. Again, both the means and the message are important aspects for our understanding of the incarnation, and how it might help us as we understand church and mission.

Movement

Firstly, it is clear that the incarnational mission of God involved *movement*. God's missionary action required the community of the Trinity to undergo some serious disruption! Without the initial movement there is no mission, no incarnation. God did not remain separate, waiting for people to come and experience the possibilities of his deliverance. God didn't apply conditions to his coming, quite the opposite. Actually it took everyone by surprise! Neither did he expect something in return, in some kind of trade-off. God did not put any obstacles in the way of his coming and his efforts; in fact he took all the responsibility in removing every obstacle himself. God was the initiator, God made the first move, God came to his world. As Peterson interprets it so succinctly in *The Message*: "*The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighbourhood*".

As we look at the life of Jesus we constantly find him going to people that other people had written off. We see him going to the lepers, engaging with tax collectors, talking to women who should be avoided, and yet also eating in the houses of the rich and the religious elite. Jesus had a blatant disregard for people's state and status, circumstances and condition. Every obstacle that others put in the way he brushed aside. This was intentional movement to all people!

Luke 15 recounts a classic story in the life of Jesus. Not for the first time the Pharisees were distinctly unimpressed with who Jesus was hanging around with, the tax collectors and 'sinners'. If you read the NIV, you will notice that the word 'sinners' is in quotation marks.

This is to help us understand that it doesn't mean those who are 'extremely morally corrupt', as we may think at first look. It is a little more targeted than that. The Pharisees were very keen that everyone in Israel followed the Jewish Law. They believed if all of Israel could do that for a day, then it would trigger God into doing all the things they could see he promised in the Prophets. There were two important ways that they tried to bring this about. Firstly they built in extra requirements that people had to keep in order to make sure that they didn't get anywhere near breaking the Law, in the same way that you might build a fence some way away from a cliff edge to prevent any possibility of people falling off. The second was to discount certain people from 'Israel', the kind of people they felt would never make the grade. They made it very clear to everyone who they were. These people were the 'sinners' that were gathering around Jesus. What they were utterly offended about was that Jesus, who said he was bringing people to obedience to God, thought that these no-hopers could in any way be a part of it. And so, Luke tells us they "*muttered, 'this man welcomes sinners and eats with them'*".

Jesus responded with three stories about lost things: a lost sheep, a lost coin, a lost son. The first parable talks about a shepherd who disregards 99 perfectly good sheep in the open country in order to go and look for one that was lost. This was crazy economics! Why leave 99 vulnerable? They were not in a pen, protected by walls from predators. They were the ones who were gathered and part of the flock, and yet the shepherd didn't stay with them. (Remember Jesus' parables are supposed to be

a bit shocking!) This crazy shepherd was the one who was so bothered about the one wayward sheep, that he goes, he moves and he searches.

The second parable talks about a woman who has lost one of her ten silver coins. We can immediately understand that these would be hugely valuable to her. It may even be that they were not just valuable in a monetary sense, but in a sentimental sense. They could have been part of her bride's dowry, and worn on a headband for all to see. So what will she do if she loses one? She is not going to be content to sit down with a cup of tea, and think, 'Oh, it will turn up', or 'at least I've got nine left.' So this woman gets a torch and gets her broom and searches unceasingly until she finds it. I think I relate to this story because I get really annoyed when I know that I put something down 'somewhere safe' and then can't for the life of me remember where that safe place is! I remember my frustration with my son when he got his first pair of glasses. A week or so later I noticed he wasn't wearing them. "Where are your glasses?" I asked. "Oh, they're lost," he said rather factually, as if that was their new state in the world. No, lostness is not a settled state! 'Lost' is a state that can be reversed; those glasses will be found!

Unfortunately I don't have space here to go into the third parable of the set, for I fear that would take another book; but there is one significant theme running through all three. So significant, in fact, that I think it is Jesus primary point: each story involves a party when the lost thing is returned! All three parables put emphasis on a celebration with friends over the reversal of lostness!

With those first two short punchy parables we can see Jesus' response to the mutterings of the Pharisees. They were worried about Jesus including people whom they had disregarded on God's behalf. In contrast, Jesus sees his whole purpose as to move towards precisely those people, those on the outside of the accepted in-crowd. The very thing that the Pharisees were muttering about, tax collectors and sinners gathering around Jesus, was in fact the best reason for a party! Jesus' movement was finding people.

Similarly, then, it is the church's responsibility to *move*. As I mentioned above, it can be a tendency for churches to see themselves as the purpose and end of the mission. We can feel satisfied as long as more people are turning up to our meetings, 'consuming our religious goods and services'. Many of us look first of all to our corporate gatherings when we consider our effectiveness missionally, as we seek to grapple with change. However, even modifying the church services can merely be changing the packaging, creating cosy sanctified places for people to come and encounter the gospel. This can reveal thinking that does not include missional movement at all, but instead is a version of an old theme: 'if you want to find God you should come to us'.

But where is God? It seems to me that Jesus was consistently not found where 'we are', but rather where 'they are'. In order to take seriously God's incarnational mission we must 'go to them'. We, corporately, must move from our comfortable church routines and safe meetings to live out this gospel amongst the people God is reaching. Michael Frost put it this way in his book *The Shaping of Things to Come*: "The missional church

disassembles itself and seeps into the cracks and crevices of society in order to be Christ to those who don't yet know him". God's love is active, moving, searching those who are missing. We do a disservice to God when that love is demonstrated as static, as mediated from hierarchy and conditional on certain acts or responses.

God's love, incarnated in the community, comes from below, from the position of a slave to the world, such that they might find God in Jesus. To truly grasp this, we must move beyond any kind of thinking that separates the sacred and the secular. If we think our church meeting or building is the place where God is to be found, we may miss the fact that God is already 'out there'. God is to be found with people at work and in our neighbourhoods, God is already at work in people's lives and in communities. Especially those who are hurting, struggling, and broken, those who are feeling lost, those who have been disregarded. The incarnational church must have a view that God is already working in the world and that, since the Holy Spirit lives in the church community, they also carry God in the world. This understanding means that the community's primary role is to follow the Spirit in identifying where God is already working and to participate with God in making that work come to fruition.

In the words of Stanley Hauerwas (*Resident Aliens*), a missional, incarnational church "is a people on the move, breathlessly trying to keep up with Jesus."

Message

Secondly, it was God's *Word* that came in Jesus. It is clear that in embodying God, the community carries a message

within it. The message is one of deliverance, healing, salvation, repentance, new creation, and also of challenge. God's coming in Jesus carried with it an inherent challenge to a new way of life. Whilst we will go on to discuss the nature of an incarnational approach to culture, it always comes in the context that God's call is counter-cultural.

Jesus' ministry has been described as 'subversive', a challenge to the dominant systems. Even from our brief look at Luke 15 above we can see how that is true in both his words, his stories, his actions, and not least who he ate with. Jesus' ministry brought great challenge to the way that cultural life was lived. The Jews understood what Jesus was doing as challenging social life, religious life and political life (including health care!). Jesus was not presenting a personal salvation compartmentalised from 'public' life. Rather Jesus was all about God's in-breaking kingdom, bringing peace and justice to all people.

We can see this clearly in the way that Jesus interacted with the various political parties of his day. We have already taken a brief look at the first group, the Pharisees. They were concerned about the moral life of Israel and were against any kind of collusion with the ruling Roman authorities in Israel. They wanted to see a distinct and pure Israel, completely dedicated to living within the Law, whatever the cost. But they were not the only option. The Sadducees were the ruling elite. They decided that it was better to work with the Romans and find a middle ground, so that Israel could still exist in some form, and that they could be in positions of influence. With no belief in a future resurrection, they

were more about making the most of today. Then there were the Essenes, a separatist group who lived out in the desert. They saw all the existing systems as corrupt, and had no hope for the return of Israel as a whole to God. The best solution for them was to start a new community completely separate to society, with their own ways of doing things. They felt they were God's true people. The final group I am going to mention here are the Zealots. We know Jesus dealt with people from this group because some of his disciples were previously associated with them. The Zealots were the insurgents, utterly opposed to the occupation by the Romans, and keen to get them out by whatever means, including the use of force.

It is into this political hotchpotch that Jesus came talking about a message of God's kingdom. This was not God's kingdom as just a future reality, or just for the individual, but a summons to all people to enter into the rule of God, and live the Kingdom way. These other groups had their own strategies for living as Israel, God's people. But Jesus' way is not the drive to national obedience of the Law, nor the working with Rome to gain power positions, nor to create a separation from a corrupt generation. It was not to take up arms against the oppressive regime. It was a call to live in a kingdom that transcends national boundaries, to live differently in the world, with different values, different motivations, to see a different outcome. The outworking of this was something subversive and challenging. The values of Jesus' kingdom are different. We know that because they brought him again and again into conflict with people of influence. They knew if people really lived the way that

Jesus was talking about, their own ideas for themselves and society would not be realised.

Hence in embodying God, the missional church is called to be a counter-cultural community. Living out the realities of God's kingdom as a 'foretaste' will be different from the surrounding culture. Often that counter-cultural challenge has been seen as the maintenance of biblical 'values', for example that of the nuclear family or personal morality. It is possible that this way of being counter-cultural is based on an old way of thinking that is trying to maintain a Christian society. The counter-cultural challenge of the missional church is far more challenging and radical than that. The model for the incarnational community is the life and death of Jesus, the one who looked to needs of others over his own and gave himself for their sake. The devastating challenge of the counter-cultural community is therefore the self-giving love of God that calls us to give up our own interests for each other and for the sake of the world. Philippians 2 is clear that the church should be modelled on the life and death of Jesus and the crucifixion is the ultimate expression of that. As a community modelled on the crucifixion, we should be so secure in the love of God, that we have no need to hold on at all costs to the rights and privileges to which we are entitled. The challenge will overflow from the community and challenge wider culture, to its very foundations. This is not just a way to live in our own cosy lives, in some kind of expression of tolerance; 'you live your way, I'll live mine'. This is the missional way of Jesus that consistently draws us to people and for people. It will call us to live in ways that counter such things as

consumerism, selfish living and abuses of the poor and marginalized. The victory of this mission is the victory that Jesus achieved on the cross.

The counter-cultural challenge is therefore not what we demand *from* the world but what we give to the world. The life of a community that lives like this will provoke response in a world that demands rights for themselves and protects personal benefit at all costs. The counter-cultural community will appeal for the rights of others and will challenge the abuses of humanity and creation.

It might be at this point where some efforts at making the gospel relevant to the world around have missed the point. Maybe the gospel is not ‘relevant’ in the way that we have tried to make it. It is possible to have a ‘relevant’ message that speaks to the felt needs of a culture and places Jesus as the answer, but all it does is satisfies the cultural emphasis on, say, individual rights and fulfilling selfish needs for example. In the process of bringing the gospel to people, we can completely miss that, in the Word becoming flesh, the message is also innately counter-cultural.

In the midst of a culture that called people to adopt all kinds of different ways of living and values, Jesus stepped in and offered a new way. “*Come, follow me,*” he said; leave your own self-serving, destructive ways of living.

In order to be counter-cultural, however, you must be connected to the culture. The subversive nature of the Incarnation was possible because of Jesus identity as a first century Jewish male, and 30 years pre-ministry preparation! The ‘offence of the gospel’ to a culture

cannot be judged readily by the ‘outsider’; otherwise the risk is purely the imposition of another culture.

Mediating

Finally, embodying God as a church community means that the nature of the communal life reflects something of the nature of God. Jesus said, *“If you have seen me you have seen the Father”* and it still applies to the incarnational church. This surely has got to be one of the scariest aspects about church life – that the church is in some way sacramental in that it mediates God to people. The God that people encounter in the church community is the God that they do or don’t believe in. Incarnational thinking understands that this is not limited to what is said at a service but to every aspect of the communal life (“the medium is the message”). In terms of gatherings, that includes not just what is communicated from the front, but the fact that there is a front! The way that we meet together, and particularly how that engages with people as individuals, is important in forming what people understand God is like. We might want to think about incarnational issues such as welcome and access, quality and reality, love and respectfulness, power and vulnerability. What is clear is that a Sunday morning gathering will not perfectly represent God. That is why it is all aspects of church life that matter, since it is the community, not just a meeting, that people encounter. It is also why it is so fantastic that there are so many different ways that people are gathering as church in these innovative times, whether in homes or cafés, whether emphasising creativity or conversation, whether messy church or reflective! Praise God for many

different expressions of church that express “*the manifold wisdom of God ... to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms*”.

People encounter God through the community of faith. This should not be a surprise to us, since Jesus said that in John 17, as he prayed for the unity of all believers. John also expresses it in 1 John 4:12: “*No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his life is made complete in us.*” I remember at one particular post-Alpha group where we were looking at this very verse. One particular lady, who was struggling with four boisterous teenage kids in a three-bed council house, came out with a wonderfully profound reflection: “You know, I think I know what this verse is about,” she said. “I have always believed in God, always thought he existed. But with all that has gone on in my life, I never believed that God could be near me. But now through the love that I have experienced through the people in this group, I can feel that God is near me.”

God is invisible, and for many people it is hard for them to identify God’s love, but it is through the love experienced in the community of faith, that God’s love is made real, touchable, huggable and pinchable.

Questions

1. In what ways could church communities move towards people?
2. Who are the people that churches write off today like the Pharisees wrote off tax collectors and sinners?
3. What cultural attitudes and practices do you feel the church has adopted that are not in line with Jesus?
4. If you were new to your church community, what would you pick up about what God was like? From meetings? From what is said? From other aspects of church life?

Chapter 4

Becoming Human: Complete Identification

Early Christianity in the Empire

AD165 saw the start of the first major epidemic that swept through the Roman Empire. Some say this plague was the first appearance of smallpox, though no one can be sure. The plague lasted 15 years in total, and wiped out somewhere between a quarter and a third of the Roman Empire. Apocalyptic scenes ensued, with whole villages wiped out and reports of 5000 people a day dying in Rome at its peak. We can only imagine the terror that caught hold of the hearts of the people. They were not helped, either, by the 'experts' of their day. The pagan priests professed ignorance as to why the gods would inflict such misery, or even whether they knew or cared. As for the philosophers, they just put it down to natural law, saying such things just happen and it was just down to chance as to whom it affects. There was no reason why. Primitive science was no help either. It had no knowledge of bacteria or viruses. As a result they had no advice on treatment or cure. With no help, understanding, or knowledge the only solution was to keep well away. People who became ill were abandoned,

whole villages emptied of the healthy in order to save themselves, sick family members were left on their own.

But there was one group of people who stood out as different. One group of people who lived by a different set of values and a different understanding of the world. This strange group of people were called Christians. These early Christians had a hope for a life that continued after death, they had a basis for understanding the state of the world, and how God has responded to that. But even beyond that they had a clear sense of what they should do in this situation, and it was deeply radical. They understood that because God loves the world, they were also called to love. God gave himself sacrificially for the world, and so Christians were called to sacrifice on behalf of others, and not only those within their own community. This was nothing less than revolutionary. And that is what those early Christians did. When all others were deserting their sick, the Christians stayed. They nursed those within their community and others who had been left behind. Some of those they nursed did recover as a result of the care they received, but the majority did not. A significant number of those who cared for the sick and dying caught the disease themselves, and died as a result. This was significant enough to be noted in the writings of the Early Church Fathers. Dionysius, writing at the time of the second plague around AD260 wrote this:

Most of our brother Christians showed unbounded love and loyalty, never sparing themselves and thinking only of one another. Heedless of danger, they took charge of the sick, attending to their

every need and ministering to them in Christ, and with them departed this life serenely happy; for they were infected by others with the disease, drawing on themselves the sickness of their neighbours and cheerfully accepting their pains. Many, in nursing and curing others, transferred their death to themselves and died in their stead ... the best of our brothers lost their lives in this manner, a number of presbyters, deacons, and laymen winning high commendation so that death in this form, the result of great piety and strong faith, seems in every way the equal of martyrdom.

Becoming Human

I find the words of Dionysius deeply moving and deeply challenging. I want to get hold of what made this marginalised community act in such a radically different way to the rest of society. I want to believe that we would do the same but wonder whether we would.

It seems to me that the early church had a deep revelation of the incarnation, and as a result they were living out this story in their own lives in the new circumstances they were faced with. Through the love of God living in them, their hearts transformed through the Holy Spirit, they found themselves able to give themselves up for the sake of their neighbour, and to take their pain upon themselves.

The well-known passage in Philippians 2 may give us some further clues as to what informs the incarnational living seen here, and to our next aspect to consider, that of Becoming Human. We may well be very familiar with this key passage and its hymn about Jesus in verses 5-11.

But I wonder if we are as clear that it is used in Philippians 2 as a lesson on how the church community should live.

The passage begins with a set of questions designed to make sure everyone understands that what follows applies to them: *“If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ”* – err yes; *“if any comfort from his love”* – yes, me again; *“if any fellowship with the Spirit”* – that’s me; *“if any tenderness and compassion”* – surely that’s all of us! Right then all of you, Paul goes on to say, get rid of selfishness and instead get your heads up and look to the interests of those around. Verse 5 is the pivotal verse linking these encouragements to the following model to copy: *“Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus.”* The point he is trying to make is not that each individual should have Jesus’ attitude, although that would be good. The ‘you’ here is plural and means something more like: ‘Have this thinking amongst you as a Christ-community.’ They as a community should have Jesus as their role model, and seek to emulate him. The way they are to do that is by following the model in the hymn that follows. The ‘becoming human’ aspect of the hymn as it journeys through to the victory of the cross, gives three steps that the community can follow:

- Denial of Rights
- Self-emptying
- Taking on

It hardly needs to be stated how astounding this reality is. Of all the options God could have chosen to reach out to his world, he chose denial of rights, self-emptying, and

assumption of a humble serving position. Let's take each in turn.

Denial of Rights

Superman has always been my hero: lifting cars, flying to save the day, x-ray vision. What other super powers does a man need? My favourite bit about Superman, though, is not actually when he is in the superman suit: red, blue, a big 'S' on the chest, pants over his trousers. No. My favourite bits are those times when he is in his suit and glasses as the slightly gormless Clarke Kent, and then something 'super' happens. Maybe a car accidentally bumps into him, and gets damaged from those secretly super legs, or he subtly pushes his glasses down his nose to laser-weld shut a leaking tank with 'super' eyes. On the outside he looks normal, but underneath he is still the amazing Superman!

I think it is easy to think of Jesus like that. He looks like the average Jewish man, but underneath God is there to do some God stuff. It is however a completely wrong way to think about Jesus. Jesus is not God *pretending* to be man, with secret powers that we can never access. In Jesus, God really *did* become man. We can look at what Jesus did, the miracles, the wisdom, the knowledge about things, and think that he did those because he was secretly God. But Jesus did all those, not because he was God, but because he was full of the Spirit. Jesus is our example, not in an unachievable way, but rather he is the ultimate example of humanity as God intended. This is where our passage starts: Jesus refused to exploit his divine attributes.

Jesus did not appeal on the basis of position or authority in his interactions with others, announcing to everyone that he was God, imposing submission. He put aside all that he could do as God and adopted a different way. This is a huge challenge as we seek to follow the model of Jesus. We live in a world dominated by the rights of the individual. This outlook feeds into our consumer culture, where we make our choices based on our personal benefit alone, whether cheaper prices or our convenience. Very rarely are we called upon to make choices based on what is best for someone else. Yet that is exactly what we are called to in Philippians 2:4 on the basis of Jesus' example. We should be looking out for other people's interests, not just our own. We should be making choices that work for other people's benefit. I wonder what a church community would really look like if we constantly made choices that worked to another's advantage. And yet how many churches have been undermined by exactly this problem, people moving to the next church because their needs were being better met there, or leaders working a power play to bolster their position?

The interests of others

In Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, we see Paul hit this issue head on. In chapter 9 he starts with himself. He knows that as a leader, in fact as an apostle, he had rights. He argues from the Bible that he was entitled to certain things, in this case primarily personal financial support. He argues strongly that the church should be giving to those who serve. However Paul wants them to understand that he decided to give that up to ensure that

the gospel was communicated clearly. At the end of chapter 10 he takes that same principle and extends it wider. On the one hand he wants to emphasise their freedom. In Christ they are free from the strict constraints of what you can and can't eat. They were concerned about food that may have been offered to idols in sacrifice, but Paul knew that the Spirit of Jesus that lives in us is not fragile, at risk of corruption. They do not need to retreat into the sacred space to protect themselves; rather they carry with them the power of God into all sorts of places. However, on the other hand, Paul is clear that just because they *can* do something does not mean that they *should* do it, just because they have the right to. The final decision is not made on the basis of the individual themselves, but once again they are to raise their eyes, look around, and "*look to the interests of others.*" They should be asking themselves a question: how will my action and my choice affect another and so aid or hinder the thing that truly matters, the spreading abroad in this world of the glory of God. As always this is tied into the example of Jesus, Paul concludes the passage with: "*Follow me as I follow Christ.*"

Longing for positions of power

This is one area where, as a church, we are deeply affected by our past. Historically the church has had and claimed positions of power and influence in the wider culture, deeply intertwined with the ruling powers. This has changed significantly in the West right now. We are in a culture that no longer values the Christian voice just because it is Christian. But has our thinking changed with it? Do we long for the positions of power and

influence again? Is the solution to reassert our rights as humans in our nation? To what extent should we follow the example of Jesus and the denial of his own rights for the sake of others?

Given those questions, we will then want to ask: what influence then is an incarnational community able to assume?

It seems to me that healthy incarnational influence is based on the ability of the community, through the Spirit, to transform society in real and tangible ways. We are not to have a disembodied voice, but to be the whole body of Christ actively involved with people. Respect and a voice are gained, not by the assumption of a position or right, but by the demonstration that God is able to affect the world and make a difference in people's lives and communities. In a world of spin and advertising, words are cheap. We are all sceptical of the latest claims, and what hidden agenda or product is being pedalled. I am sure we have all had that phone call: "Hi my name is Sue from XYZ Company, I am not trying to sell you anything." Yeah, right, why call then?!

Trust is built by being there, faithfully living it out, making a difference for good. Authentic living is the best authority in a sceptical world. It seems to me that as churches we need to get some 'reality' into our 'truth'. The Gospel Coalition Network express it this way: "Seek service rather than power, and you will be given influence".

Self-emptying

In our passage, the denial of rights is followed by this strange phrase "emptied himself". The NIV says "*he made*

himself nothing”, which misses slightly this sense of pouring out the contents of a glass. “Jesus emptied himself.”

This emptying is what enabled Jesus to come as a man. It is a crucial step in this incarnational process, in the same way that you cannot put on one set of clothes until you have taken off the previous set. Self-emptying means letting go of things that really matter to us, in order to take on what matters to another.

As parents, we get a crash course in this incarnational principle. From the very first moment the peaceful run of life gets disrupted by a very small bundle of fun. Previously the parent enjoyed peaceful, uninterrupted sleep that endured for hours; now the peace is suddenly cracked by the regular needs of the child. You might think that this a temporary issue, but the crash course continues as it moves to other areas of life. The regular TV viewing of your favourite programme gives way to the latest rather bizarre children’s programme repeated over and over...and over. As they get older, relaxing Saturday mornings are replaced with mornings standing in the wind and rain watching a bunch of children following a ball around. Then, just as they get old enough to entertain themselves, quiet nights in are disturbed by taxi service calls. Actually for the vast majority of parents these trials are all part of the fun of seeing growth and change in their son or daughter.

For incarnational mission, self-emptying means to give up those things that would cause us to feel superior to other people in our interaction with them. Self-emptying is the required step before being able to truly identify with others.

When we think of mission, this self-emptying involves the putting off of our own culture. Culture is like the water that a fish swims in; you are unaware of its presence until you leave it, and so we can't just forget it. But what it does mean is having the maturity of self-awareness that culture is deeply intertwined with our thinking and behaviour. It is often when we encounter people from other cultures that we notice. That is certainly true for me as an Englishman.

An Englishman's dilemma

I was at a friend's wedding a little while back and found myself with the typical Englishman's dilemma: how should I greet the bride and groom? The problem was that, although I knew them quite well, I hadn't seen them for a long time, and I knew the bride and the groom from different contexts. As the groom approached I went for the good solid shake of the hand - safe, friendly, a little joke about the formality. That all went absolutely fine. Then there was the bride. Shaking hands was inappropriate, a hug too informal, a little raise of the hand insufficient. So there was only one option left; I had to go for the kiss on the cheek. I went for it with uncharacteristic boldness. After a slight jiggle over which side to kiss to avoid a full-on smacker, I headed to my left. All was going well, but as I pulled away I noticed that she was heading for a second. To my horror I had forgotten one crucial bit of information, she had been living in France for the last couple of years. It was too late. I thought I had done my duty and my confident effort at a good greeting descended into apologetic embarrassment. This is a common experience for me.

You see, we English don't have a good cultural norm for greeting someone.

Similarly, I have discovered that people from other countries get really frustrated when I ask them, "How are you?" With other English people this tends to work quite smoothly. It goes something like this: "Hi! How are you?" Then I get the reply, "Good thanks, how are you?" "Fine", I reply, and the ritual is done. We can move on to the substance of the conversation. The frustration that people from other countries feel is because they are not familiar with the cultural greeting process. They don't understand that "how are you?" is not really a question about their well-being, but part of the greeting which is polite and un-invasive, and something that must be got past for the conversation to continue. These cultural issues that we face are not right or wrong, rather they are just the way English culture works.

Seeds, not ready meals

These examples are a little trivial in some ways, but they are the tip of the iceberg of cultural differences. They begin to give us clues as to how the gospel might be well and truly landed and embedded in our culture. We need this self-awareness of how the gospel is culturally conditioned to us. Self-emptying requires that we accept this fact even if we don't know yet which aspects are obscured to another culture by it. There is no question that this is hard, particularly when the cross-cultural mission is taking place on our doorstep rather than in a jungle! However, this is an open-handed, humble approach to mission that accepts that we are in some way still carriers of the disease that we seek to cure. The

action of the missional community seeks to hear and learn from the people it is reaching and it seeks to catch the sound of God's prior activity in their lives.

Very often we have tried to 'fill ourselves up' in preparation for mission, whether that is our pre-prepared answers, or the information that we intend to deliver. But, as the Archbishop of Canterbury has said, "It is no good having perfect answers to questions no one is asking." We do not have a pre-packaged, shrink-wrapped, ready-meal gospel, that lands on people's laps from above. This is very different to the 'seed' of the kingdom that Jesus often talked about. It is striking that in Jesus' conversations with people he never used the same analogy for the gospel twice. To Nicodemus he talks about being born again, in the next chapter he talks to the women at the well about the water of life. To one about healing, to another about repentance. Jesus comes to people from below, taking time to listen. This old Chinese poem captures it well:

Go to the people
Live among them
Learn from them
Love them
Start with what they know
Build on what they have.

Taking on...

In the incarnation, God did not just become human; God became a first century Jewish male. He was born as one, he spent 30 years growing up as one, and amazingly we know very little about it. The reason for this is, I propose,

that it was all fairly normal and there wasn't much to say. God's self-denial and self-emptying action in the Incarnation involved the adoption of the culture that was being reached out to. This was not God 'dressing up', rather it was God coming to terms with their real existence, experiencing their pains and their joys. God came living their life and speaking their language. David Bosch says in *Transforming Mission*, "the universal Word speaks only with a local dialect". Incarnational mission therefore seeks to see the gospel and the church speaking to a community in their cultural language, reflecting their experiences. If it is God's nature to undertake such sacrifice, it must also be the nature of his church. The church is most true to itself when it gives itself up, in the current form, to be re-formed among those being reached.

A story

Vincent Donovan was an American Catholic missionary to the Masai, the noble nomadic people of East Africa, in the 1960s. No one had had success in reaching them with the gospel. They would not come and stay at the mission compound. Education and health facilities did not draw them. Donovan resolved he would have to go to them, on their terms. His book *Christianity Rediscovered* tells of his struggles as he discovered how to be both faithful to the truths passed down by the church and from the Bible, yet to rework the vocabulary of the gospel story to communicate with the Masai in their culture.

But even when groups, usually by common debated consent, chose to follow Christ, still church among them had to be formed. From what they knew of gospel values,

they had to be allowed to form church in their culture, even deciding what word or phrase they would use for 'church'. It was a case of their making it up as they went along, and the Holy Spirit being trusted to do that work among them, with Donovan acting as a consultant but not director.

Significant cultural challenges arose. A notable example was that Masai men and women do not eat meals together. Communion then raised very basic issues. But the converted Masai understood that the change of their beliefs included that Christ made different kinds of people one, because they were equally loved, and that this pattern would have to change. So men and women of the Masai 'brotherhood of God' (their name for 'church') ate together for the first time – ever. It could only have happened if they decided it should be so. The life and discipline of the emerging church took shape by the creative apostolic task of listening both to the gospel and the culture.

Vincent Donovan's apostolic comment on encountering youth of the West was: "Do not try to call them back to where they were, and do not try to call them to where you are, beautiful as that place may seem to you. You must have the courage to go with them to a place that neither you nor they have been before."

Incarnational mission

Incarnational mission is the means by which the gospel can become a genuine part of a people group without damaging the innate cultural frameworks that provide that people group with a sense of meaning and history. This is because the Gospel is a message of good news for

the whole world; not one of conquest and cultural imperialism, but one of redemption and transformation. The challenge is to engage in conversation with culture, to learn and to embrace the culture, to plant the seed of the gospel in the 'soil' of that culture, and to nurture its growth. The focus then is one of 'new creation', the nurturing of a plant grown from a seed that is then something new and fresh compared to the seed. The missionary message should change when it hits the ground of a new culture as it allows for the fact that the message is currently limited by the carrier.

Equally importantly the incarnational community must seek to embody the gospel in an appropriate way to the culture that it is reaching. The form of church cannot be predefined or idealised in the mission process, rather the shape and form of the communal life must grow and work with the receivers of the message. As stated above, it is not possible to separate the content of the message from the way it is communicated. The gospel is not a new theory; it is a message that must be lived out anew in each culture. This is very much opposed to a separatist view of church. The call here is for an engaged church, a church living out life in the context of the world, a community sharing in the joys, pains and troubles of those around and living a transformed gospel reality in the midst. Bonhoeffer, a German theologian during Hitler's Germany, said, "The church is only the church when it exists for others ... the church must share in the secular problems of ordinary human life, not dominating, but helping and serving." The result is not so much a church 'for others' as a church 'with others'.

The alternative to an incarnational mission is a gospel that is pre-packaged, artificial, and inauthentic, one that does not reflect the complex nature of people's everyday experience. The incarnational community, like Jesus, eats and plays with the people being reached, seeking to interact in a real way with them. This then allows the rhythms and lifestyle patterns of the people being reached to determine the shape of the communal life and corporate gatherings. As the gospel gets planted and a church gets birthed amongst a new people, we find the possibility of multiplication growth rather than addition growth. In the latter, persons are picked off one at a time out of their contexts to a foreign community. In the former the gospel creates disciples within their contexts providing a real possibility of the gospel impacting the whole people group.

On the Incarnation: A Summary

The Gospel of Luke recounts a beautiful story of a woman, notorious in the town for her behaviour, coming to see Jesus while he was eating at the house of a Pharisee. Jesus had been invited as an honoured guest to a respectable meal. As they sat on the floor, reclining at the table, the meal was suddenly invaded by this woman. She came because she had heard Jesus was going to be there, and so she stood behind him. She was crying, and her tears fell on his feet. She bent down, wiping his wet feet with her hair, she kissed them and poured perfume on them. The Pharisee was less than impressed with the invasion, especially from this woman. Jesus, though, let it all happen, well aware of what she was like, perfectly

comfortable with the time and attention she was giving him.

The story has an interesting introduction. Jesus is comparing his mission to that of John the Baptist. Because of his actions, Jesus has been accused of being a glutton and a drunkard and friend of ‘sinners’. Jesus makes this point: “*But wisdom is proved right by all her children.*” A rather strange phrase on the face of it; what is he talking about?

Jesus’ point is this: how do you decide if a course of action is right or good? What demonstrates that you have operated wisely? The answer is, you look at the fruit, at the consequences. Suddenly it makes sense for this strange comment to precede our story. The woman washing Jesus’ feet is a perfect example of the fruit and consequences of Jesus’ actions; the people he ate with and the people he associated with. This woman, rejected by the religious, labelled by society as a whole, knew that Jesus was the one person who was different. He was the person you go to when you are in her situation, when you needed help like she needed help. We don’t know for sure how she knew those things. Was it Jesus’ reputation only? Had she already had some kind of encounter with him? Maybe she had observed from afar how he had treated others. Whatever the reason, she was drawn to Jesus, poured herself out to him, and experienced his gracious touch. Wisdom is proved right by all her children.

Incarnational mission is not a new *strategy*, but a *new way of living*. It is not comfortable, or tidy, but it is Jesus’ invitation to his followers; an invitation to move from our comfort zones and take on his way of living. The

church is a community of people called to follow Jesus and to live out corporately Jesus' life.

As an incarnational community we are to 'move into our neighbourhoods'. Giving up our own self-interests and positions of power and even our rights, we are to empty ourselves of 'answers', to take the humble posture of a learner and to enter into conversation with our neighbour. We are to take on the form of our neighbour, to speak their language, and to seek to understand their thoughts, values, and symbols. We are to take the posture of a servant to them, to experience their life of joy and pain, and so to allow the gospel to speak to them where they are at and to allow them to experience the gospel in the shared life of the faith community. We are to live out our lives in such a way as to point beyond ourselves to the greater reality of God, and to offer them life in God and hope of deliverance, to call them too to offer their loyalties to the one true God in the context of the community. By drawing people into the life of the community by their encounter with the cultural, yet counter-cultural, acts of that community, allows them to not respond to a self-help or a self-protective gospel, but ensures that they understand that they are responding to a call to a new way of life.

This is a mission of love expressing a God of love embodied in a community of believers. This cannot be just words or ideas but a dynamic movement of the community into the lives of those around with real acts of love that connect with people's lives in a personal way. This is God's great plan! Notice that this is not the work of an evangelist nor the work of 'the Pastor', but the work of a community living out a life of love.

Questions

The Church is most true to itself when it gives itself up, in the current form, to be reformed among those who do not know God's Son. In each new context the Church must die to live.

1. What is it about the current form of your church that is the biggest hindrance to people not in it knowing God?
2. How do you feel about the example of the early Christians at the start of the chapter? Can you think of any equivalents in our day?
3. In what ways should we give up our rights for the benefit of others?
4. In what ways do we engage with the world on the basis of our rights?
5. How might we empty ourselves in our engagement with the world?
6. In what ways can we take on the pain and joys of the world? How do we enter their world?
7. If you couldn't use the word 'church', what word or phrase would you use instead?

Chapter 5

So, what about Church Planting?

We have noted so far in this book that the church is not the end goal of mission. The church does not exist for itself, for its own self-survival. Rather the church is the people called together to live under the rulership of Jesus, and embody that rulership for the rest of creation. The church exists for God, for his glory, and for the sake of his mission. We can see that for existing churches this presents a challenge to adopt a missional mode. To let go of parochial, self-protectionist, and self-serving ways of being, and to lift our heads up and let our place in the world affect all aspects of our life together. The question for this chapter is: how does this radical view of mission affect how we think about church planting?

All through this book we have been thinking about what it means to reflect the movement expressed in the incarnation. As the church seeks to be Jesus for all people, we need to constantly be moving and re-incarnating the church for each new setting. For the church to be truly active and moving, to genuinely be able to reach new people, and new *sorts* of people, we need more churches amongst more people. This is not just so we can have more churches, but because the

church is God's chosen vehicle for his mission, and God's chosen means for discipleship: to see people grow in the following of Jesus, to better represent him in the world. If the church is the place where there is a glimpse of how God intends humanity to be, renewed and living out God's purposes, then it is clearly not possible to do that as individuals. One individual saved is not fulfilling God's mission. Jesus said, "*Go and make disciples*" and together these disciples gather as church. This is not getting people into a static organisation, but gathering together as a missional people, co-journeying through life, making a difference at every step. This movement and this difference will result in more new disciples, who gather together in their new setting. Church should not get stuck in a logjam of gathering new people, but should be constantly reproducing - reproducing more disciples, reproducing more churches.

When thinking about church planting, there can be a temptation to start with the church. It is possible to start with the practical issues of what should it look like and where should it meet. I wonder what sort of missional communities would be the result of starting instead with the mission. It has been suggested that we don't plant churches; we plant the gospel and see what church emerges as a result. If we were to think this way then our church planting strategy might be completely reversed. We might look out over a city, or a town, or a housing estate, or even a network, say of gym members or website users, and ask firstly: what would the mission of God look like for these people, for this area, for this network? Then secondly: what kind of community of faith could embody and live out that mission? Then

finally: what worship and discipleship would best serve that community of faith?

For example:

- Looking across a community and seeing there could be a kids' club and families work.
- Looking across a housing estate and seeing there could be a cleanup.
- Looking across a workplace and seeing there could be rest/retreat.
- Looking across an online network and seeing there could be a moderator.
- Looking across an immigrant population and seeing there could be justice.
- Looking across a poor area and seeing there could be food.

This reversed order might help us by starting where people are, getting into their lives, their patterns of life, and entering into where they already are. And then thinking about what gathering would look like in their context, what discipleship would look like for them.

The goal of church planting then is a new indigenous body of disciples, well-suited to mission.

Taking Hold of the Missional Impulse

This is not a menu, or a choice of options, but some ways in which a variety of people have tried to take hold of the missional impulse. No doubt you can think of better examples. Read them and let your mind wander!

Messy church

St Wilfrid's, Portsmouth had a good number of children involved in a club on a Thursday evening but were a little bemused by the fact that it never translated into Sunday morning attendance. They decided not to pursue trying to get people there on a Sunday, noting that Sunday is a day full of family activities for many people, and the standard church service was very foreign to them. Instead they decided to work with what they had already, and so once a month they started *messy church*. The doors open at 3:30 p.m., and families arrive, have a drink, settle down to board games and chat. At 4 p.m. they spend an hour doing some craft activities. They have a selection available something to appeal to the broad range of people. All ages are involved with getting people engaged with the process, or just a bit of conversation. They aim to theme the craft with the theme of the evening, and maybe use some of that theme later in the evening. They then call everyone together for a 15-minute focussed time of worship and take that chance to communicate about the theme of the evening. The evening is rounded off with a good hot meal together! There are all kinds of levels of engagement with the evening, but there is always friendship, fun, focus – oh, and mess!

Supper church

Looking at the various skills within our church, there was one thing that we had always managed to do well: food. So, it made sense to make food the centrepiece of our festival events. We started with Christmas and Easter and designed an evening that interwove the food and the content.

Christmas for example, involved a full three-course Christmas dinner alternated by carol singing, quizzes, and the Christmas history and meaning. This wasn't a performance from the front, but a large community event that involved the guests as participants, including them bringing along food. We didn't want to do an event to them, but involve them in our celebrations. This same idea has spread to other times of the year. Great evenings not to be missed!

Café church

Café church seeks to take the church into an environment less foreign to people than a Sunday church service. As you would hope and expect, the setting sets the atmosphere. It is relaxed and informal. In a café people expect to chat and discuss things. Sections of the event can be led from the front: music performance, video presentation or talks. At other times conversations are guided around the coffee tables, using a set of questions from a piece of paper or a facilitator. The nature and depth of the conversation will depend totally on who is round the table.

Café-style church is another possibility where some aspects of café church can be brought into an existing church setting by changing the layout and format. Café church can be a relaxed non-threatening comfortable environment where people can access what is going on to the extent that they choose.

Baraka Café in Leeds is an example of people moving further out into the community, opening a café and setting up a social enterprise business with the intention of building into the community and running a good fair trade business. Their mission is to be "a heart within the

community helping us all to love to live.” Through great quality service, an open welcome and success at building into the community, they have gained a fantastic reputation. Recently the council have asked them to open a coffee outlet in the local library.

Home church

Home church seeks to take hold of the fact the church is not somewhere you go to, but something we are as a community. By meeting at a time that suits, and around a meal, there is an attempt to strip away the added-on bits that we so often have to do to make church happen. By being a community that eats together, worships together, and reads the Bible together, this simple community becomes clearer in its sense of mission, not least locally in the neighbourhood where it is. The home can be a great place of welcome and comfort to all who come, and very adaptable to whomever is there. Being simple in its makeup and not requiring upfront leaders, it becomes more easily reproducible as more people are reached.

Shoe-shop church

The Subterranean Shoe Room is a very cool retro-shoe store in San Francisco. It was opened this year by an unlikely proprietor. Brock Bingaman is a church planter who came to town with every intention of planting a conventional church. But he soon discovered San Francisco is crawling with failed conventional church planters. Crestfallen, young Brock realised that there was no point trying to re-create what many had tried and failed at before him. Needing gainful employment, Brock says he turned to his first love: shoes! Now the Subterranean is doing a

roaring trade. Brock has a special gift when it comes to shoes, though. He strikes up a conversation with those who browse his collection and when they tell him they're not sure what they're looking for, he has a standard retort, "Tell me about yourself and I'll tell you what shoes you need." And so scores of San Franciscans have opened their lives up to him. After hearing their story, Brock tells them he has just the thing they're looking for and pulls out a pair of pink Pumas or cherry-red Doc Martins. And he seems to get it right every time. "As a church planter, I spent 90% of my time with Christians. Now as a shoe salesman, I spend 90% of my time with non-Christians." He has developed significant relationships with all sorts of people that you don't find in church. It's a tough town to evangelise and Brock has struck on a natural way to incarnate the message of the gospel to a people group normally hostile to Christianity. This is missional church thinking. Brock engages in the rhythms and life of a host culture to genuinely listen to their hopes and fears.

No Warehouses, no Vacuum Cleaners

You see, church is not supposed to be a warehouse. We are not storing up people for heaven and keeping ourselves entertained in the meantime. Our key issues are not stock control and storage space. Church is also not supposed to be a vacuum cleaner. We are not sucking people out of their neighbourhoods, their friendships, their workplace, in order to gather together a new combination of Christians. Instead we are mobilising communities of missional disciples flowing outwards with the love of God. New disciples are made, new areas are reached, and as the church reassembles itself in each new setting there is the

wonderful opportunity for new churches, diverse and vibrant.

When looking at the above examples or thinking about a church plant, there are three aspects that should be considered. If you think about these aspects as three overlapping circles, I think the majority of reasons for church planting can fall into one of the circles or overlapping sections.

Authenticity

A reason to plant a new church could come from a desire to rediscover what Christianity and church are really about. They might feel that what they are currently experiencing in a church, or have experienced in the past, is caught up in old traditions, and has lost what it was all about. Such things might include life in the Spirit or spiritual gifts; it might include issues of doctrine or community life.

Relevance

A reason to plant a new church could come from a desire to bring church and the gospel closer to a surrounding culture. It may be that the existing churches are perceived to be out of touch with people and not easily connecting with people's lives. Such things might include style of worship, language, ways of communicating or ways of gathering.

Mission

A reason to plant a new church could come from a desire to reach out to a new people group and/or a new geographical area. It may be there is not an existing church that engages

with that group or area, or that there is no effective mission taking place.

Getting the balance right

All three of these overlapping aspects can be good reasons to plant a church. However, if a church plant falls into one category only, then it can miss all that it should be.

For example it is possible that a church that becomes solely focussed on ‘authenticity’ gets completely disconnected from the world around. They start the church to recover something of what the church should be, but lose what it means to be the church ‘in the world’. Equally a church plant could be focussed on ‘relevance’, and wanting to ensure that church connects well with the surrounding culture, but lose in the process the challenge to live a new way of life as followers of Jesus. Even a church plant focussed on mission may not take seriously the need to be faithful to all that God’s people intended, or the real challenges of meeting the surrounding culture where they are at.

It may be then that these three categories of motivation for church planting are all required to come together to allow a new church plant to best take the opportunities of living as the people of God in a new setting.

We have already discussed how we live in a world that has within it great diversity. We have many different cultures living in the same towns and cities; the nations have come to our own doorstep. But the diversity doesn’t stop there. More and more people have working patterns that makes their week run in many diverse ways, a whole variety of shift patterns and working days. Other people’s lives are greatly affected by their families, particularly

family breakdown that limits time with the kids. The incarnation takes seriously these diverse issues and those of particularly local cultures and people groups. Into this diverse culture should come a variety of churches. There should be variety in meeting patterns, in size, in language, in music, and in food! New churches are needed to meet this increasingly diverse culture.

Every church plant should have mission at its heart. Maybe that is an obvious thing to say, but sadly, historically many do not. In fact, some have used the categories of authenticity and relevance as an opportunity to split off from the old, in order to create something that reflects personal preference, or even personal issues, but has within it no real sense of mission to people around. It is mission that gives relevance its purpose, and mission that gives authenticity its true expression. When a church plant is conceived, the issues of mission must be core because mission is the hard thing to do. It seems to me that the 'success factors' for a church plant must be clear at the start. We all have things that we have in the back of our minds that cause us to look back over a year and cause us to pat ourselves on the back and say, 'that was a good year', or walk out of a church gathering and say, 'that was a good morning'. Sometimes we are conscious of them, sometimes we are not. I was recently talking to a building surveyor who had been promoted to a company director. He was complaining at a lack of fulfilment in his new high-level position. "How am I supposed to judge if I am doing well if I can't refer to the number of buildings that I have surveyed in the last week, and all I do is sit in meetings?" he said. We must be clear on our 'success factors', otherwise the hidden ones will be the aspects that make us feel good or bad in a

year's time, and therefore will ultimately influence what we do.

Life on the fringe

The church should be continually rediscovering what it means to faithfully and authentically follow Jesus in the world. The world constantly changes and the church needs to constantly change with it. Not because it is a slave to relevance, but because as times change we see the things that we do and say as churches in a new light. We discover that some of those things are not now helpful to us to be faithful to Jesus. We must change to stay the same, when the world changes around us. What better opportunity to constantly make steps towards a greater alignment with Jesus than when a new community is being formed.

It follows from this that the church should also have its head up, looking to the people around. How are they talking? What are they reading? How do they gather? As an incarnational people, we should allow our context to influence how we live out the gospel. We are all aware of the difficulty and issues related to change. We may be able to see clearly the speck in another's eye, whether it is moving from pews to comfy chairs or changing from an overhead projector to a laptop and projector. But what if there are logs in our own eyes, as we hold on hard to other practices that we consider to be less trivial?

Few churches and leaders are able to risk making whole scale experimental changes; nor should they necessarily, since they are entrusted with God's people. A church plant is not incumbent to those issues, as it starts afresh. In church plants there is room to experiment, when put in the context of authenticity, relevance and mission. But in the

established churches there is still a fringe where innovation, testing, and trying new things can happen. As one church leader has put it, “The fringe innovates, the core imitates”. The core can learn from the fringe, what works and what doesn’t, and implement that which is learned and is effective.

Questions

1. What communities are you part of at the moment? Can you imagine what discipleship would look like for them?
2. Which of the three motivations do you think were behind your current church being ‘planted’?
3. What are the *success factors* that you are currently using for your church or small group?

Conclusion

How then should we live?

In this book we have seen that God's people should be continually rediscovering what it means to faithfully and authentically follow Jesus in a changing world.

It is my hope that this book has been provocative and maybe even disruptive to your vision of church and mission. The main hope of course is that there is some influence on what we do, how we live out church, how we engage with the world.

Very often books on mission deal with this issue of how to do it, and I am very aware that I have not done that! I have not given 10 ways to do this and 5 ways to do that. Let me repeat something we said earlier:

It is so tempting ... to tinker with projects and initiatives, and import the latest church model. It is also tempting to jump headlong into meeting the needs of the local community. Whilst all of those may be helpful, for a mission-smelling church we must start with God, who he is and what he is like. From that we start to look at what he is after, and how his mission should be brought about in the world. And it is in the light of both of those that we begin to look at the church, our church life, our ways and patterns of meeting, our organisational structures and our programmes. The point is that none of these are fixed;

rather they are to be discerned from an understanding of God and his mission.

What I have sought to do here is to reframe the picture, repaint the background, and having done that to hand the paint brush over to you. An incarnational mission is a deeply creative adventure. This journey of following Jesus is firstly about faithfulness – faithfulness to God, to his word, and to his Spirit. Secondly it is about being grounded – grounded in the world in which we find ourselves, connected to the people around. This Spirit-led adventure cannot be about ‘mimicking’ something that has worked elsewhere, but a more robust, thorough and challenging journey. It takes time and courage to ask the hard questions, it takes failure as well as success. So I cannot and must not give you easy, ‘mimic-able’ solutions. Each of us must apply these questions as communities, for our life, work, family, and friendships.

It is my conviction that this view of mission can transform all of our church communities. We may feel disabled by a lack of resources and people, unable to replicate the model of the ‘successful’ church. An incarnational paradigm turns this around, empowering every church, from ‘2 or 3 gathered’ upwards, to live out this gospel authentically in the context of their neighbourhoods and social networks.

Church planting in particular is a great opportunity for starting on a new basis. There is room for creativity and experimenting, as we try to work out the threefold motivation of authenticity, relevance, and mission. And these church plants can be a source of life and learning for the existing churches: *“The fringe innovates, the core imitates.”*

Conclusion

In this changing world people are wanting to see something that works, that genuinely makes a difference for living. Too often Jesus' message has been hidden and lost to the people who really need it. The church must change and re-find its footing, having been shaken loose from the old cultural anchor points to have the kind of impact on the world that Jesus intended. And so we should feel released, set free with a new vision to build lifestyle connections with the communities around and make a real difference, as we demonstrate to a hurting world what it means to live as the people of God.

Small Group Resources

Small group resources to help unpack this and other **2020vision**> **Books** can be found on our website:

www.saltlight.org/2020vision