

**Mission in contemporary society through the framework of “church-leaving”**

I have chosen to explore mission in contemporary society through the framework of “church-leaving” by which I mean participating in *missio Dei* (the sending of God) of His people outside the institution of mainstream church.

My thesis is that mission is more effective in contemporary western society outside mainstream church; that we are living in a time where the ‘sodal’ (sending and pioneering) form of God’s mission is likely to have more missional impact than the ‘modal’ (the locally rooted stable congregation) form of being church that has become the default position of Western Christianity<sup>1</sup>.

So what do we mean by “mission”? As Bosch states, it is “clear that at no time in the past two millennia was there only one single “theology of mission.”<sup>2</sup> He argues that different theologies of mission can be complementary and mutually enriching and states that “ultimately, mission remains undefinable.....the most we can hope for is to formulate some *approximations* of what mission is all about”.<sup>3</sup>

During the twentieth century, there was a significant shift in understanding mission as God’s mission. Karl Barth was one of the first theologians to introduce the concept of mission as an activity of God himself and from this, the idea of *missio Dei* first emerged at the Willingen Conference of the International Missionary Council (1952). Classical doctrine on mission (the sending of the Son by the Father and of the Holy Spirit by the Father and the Son<sup>4</sup>) was expanded to include the sending of

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<sup>1</sup> Steve Aisthorpe and Dave Walker, *The Invisible Church* (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 2016), pp. 180-183

<sup>2</sup> David J Bosch and others, *Transforming Mission* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2011), p. 8

<sup>3</sup> Bosch, p. 9

the church into the world by Father, Son and Holy Spirit.<sup>5</sup> This was very significant as the church had previously seen itself as the Kingdom of God on earth, as a divine institution.<sup>6</sup> In other words, the concept of mission changed from the church's mission (a primarily human endeavour) to God's mission.<sup>7</sup>

Another dramatic shift that has occurred in recent times is the concept that mission is ministry by the whole people of God rather than just the monopoly of ordained men. This "laicization" of the church is causing many challenges within mainstream churches but indicates an end of the "top-down" Constantinian approach which has dominated Western Christianity for the last 1700 years.<sup>8</sup>

During the twentieth century there was a significant shift in thinking from a church focus to a kingdom focus among some theologians who began to examine the nature of the gospel of the kingdom, as proclaimed by Jesus Christ and the early church. Beginning in the late 1970s, this focus on the kingdom that had been consistently maintained by the Reformed and Anabaptist traditions, spread to other churches, influencing traditional denominations and particularly emerging churches. Those with a kingdom focus look to Jesus as the one who initiated the work of the kingdom in Israel and they endeavour to point to the kingdom through their communal practices in postmodern culture.<sup>9</sup> As Synder states; "We are called to be 'kingdom people' not 'church people'."<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Bosch, p. 398

<sup>6</sup> Bosch, p. 377

<sup>7</sup> Bosch, p. 400

<sup>8</sup> Bosch, p. 478

<sup>9</sup> Eddie Gibbs and Ryan K Bolger, *Emerging Churches* (London: SPCK, 2006), p. 48

<sup>10</sup> Bosch, p. 387

In 1984, the Anglican Church attempted to capture the breadth of what mission might be in its “Five Marks of Mission” which are:

1. To proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom (Evangelism)
2. To teach, baptise and nurture new believers
3. To respond to human need by loving service
4. To seek to transform unjust structures of society
5. To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth<sup>11</sup>

Although the Five Marks are not a perfect definition of mission, they provide a good working basis for a holistic approach to mission.

Based on the contemporary understanding of mission described above, the framework of “church-leaving” for mission is now considered. Steve Aisthorpe states that “Churchless faith is a feature of the dramatic and momentous change going on in Western society”.<sup>12</sup> (By churchless, Aisthorpe is referring to Christians who are not church-goers<sup>13</sup> by which I understand he means those who do not attend mainstream, congregational church.)

A number of studies have been carried out to look at the phenomenon of church-leaving. The first rigorous research was undertaken by Philip Richter and Leslie Francis in the 1990s and the findings published in *Gone but not forgotten*.<sup>14</sup> This found that about two-thirds of leavers continued to have a Christian faith. A second study by Alan Jamieson comprised in-depth interviews with just over 100 church-leavers and fifty church leaders in New Zealand during the 1990s. Through

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<sup>11</sup> Anglican Office, *Anglican Communion Website*, 1984  
<[http://www.anglicancommunion.org/identity/marks\\_of\\_mission.aspx](http://www.anglicancommunion.org/identity/marks_of_mission.aspx)> [Accessed 8 May 2019].

<sup>12</sup> Aisthorpe, p. 1

<sup>13</sup> Aisthorpe, p. ix

<sup>14</sup> Philip Richter and Leslie J. Francis, *Gone But Not Forgotten* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd Ltd, 1998).

listening to these people, Jamieson came to recognise that for many, their decision to leave mainstream church was a necessary and integral part of an ongoing journey of faith.<sup>15</sup> Of those he interviewed, 94 per cent had been in leadership positions and on average had been involved in congregational church for more than 15 years. The majority indicated that they were “retaining their faith while leaving church”.<sup>16</sup>

Further extensive research was undertaken by Aisthorpe in Scotland of over 1000 church-leavers between 2013 and 2015. Aisthorpe’s research found that a significant number of Christians had felt compelled to leave congregational church in order to be more effective in the mission to instigate the new Kingdom of God.<sup>17</sup> As Aisthorpe states; “It may seem bizarre to hear of people leaving church to be more missionally effective, but it is a contemporary reality.”<sup>18</sup>

Aisthorpe reports that forms of Christian community that are highly organised are declining and that most people who move away from church congregations are involved in fellowship that is informal and highly relational.<sup>19</sup> Based on extensive research in the USA, George Barna predicts that the number of Christians seeing the local church congregation as their primary means of spiritual experience and expression will drop from 70% in 2000 to 30-35 % by 2025. In contrast, he predicts that there will be a rise in Christians seeing informal expressions of fellowship and worship as their main context from 5% in 2000 to 30-35% by 2025.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Aisthorpe, p. 11

<sup>16</sup> Alan Jamieson, *A Churchless Faith* (London: SPCK, 2002), p. 15

<sup>17</sup> Aisthorpe, p. 167

<sup>18</sup> Aisthorpe, p. 180

<sup>19</sup> Aisthorpe, pp. 194-195

<sup>20</sup> Aisthorpe, p. 197

Since the 1990s, there has been a significant growth in the number of “Fresh expressions” which are new, culturally specific congregations. Over 3000 of these new forms of church now exist, spanning most church traditions in the UK.<sup>21</sup> At the same time there has been a rapid growth in what is termed the “Emerging Church”. Gibbs defines emerging churches as “missional communities”<sup>22</sup> “that practice the way of Jesus within postmodern cultures.”<sup>23</sup>

The emerging church movement is so diverse and fragmented that some are uncomfortable to acknowledge it as a movement at all.<sup>24</sup> Although the communities may be small in number, they are growing rapidly as their influence spreads through social media interactions. Some of them are large, attracting crowds of hundreds or thousands, but the majority are small, consisting of independent groups.<sup>25</sup>

The driver for this migration from mainstream to emerging church appears to be that mainstream churches have not recognised that we are in the midst of a cultural revolution and that nineteenth century forms of church do not connect with today’s post-modern culture. As Gibbs says; “Church is a modern institution in a post-modern world. It must embody the gospel within the culture of postmodernity if it is to survive the 21<sup>st</sup> century”.<sup>26</sup>

Effective mission within any particular community requires an understanding of their culture. It has been demonstrated that missionaries who engage with the

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<sup>21</sup> Fresh Expressions, *Fresh Expressions Website*, 2019 <<http://freshexpressions.org.uk/about/what-is-a-fresh-expression/>> [Accessed 8 May 2019].

<sup>22</sup> Gibbs, p. 28

<sup>23</sup> Gibbs, p. 44

<sup>24</sup> Gibbs, p. 29

<sup>25</sup> Gibbs, p. 29

<sup>26</sup> Gibbs, p. 17

culture and seek to communicate the gospel in indigenous forms while remaining faithful to Scripture<sup>27</sup> are more effective in bring people to faith (eg Vincent Donovan's mission to the Masai.<sup>28</sup>)

The issue in the West is that the culture has been static for a very long time. Since the conversion of Constantine in AD313 until the middle of the twentieth century, the church occupied a central position in Western societies, a period referred to as Christendom. A more recent cultural and social element was the emergence of modernity (rationalism) which began prior to the Renaissance and survived into the twentieth century. Since the 1950s, two cultural shifts have affected the whole of society; firstly the transition from Christendom to post-Christendom and secondly, the transition from modernity to post-modernity.<sup>29</sup>

In addition, we are in the midst of a number of other cultural shifts including the transition from Westernization to globalisation, a communication revolution from print culture to an electronic culture, an economic shift as the West transitions from national, industrial-based economies to international, information-based, consumer driven economies, as well as major advances in scientific breakthroughs in understanding the human body and a convergence of science and religion as theoretical physics explores the fundamental nature of space and time.<sup>30</sup>

As mentioned above, there has also been a paradigm shift in theological thinking from a church focus to a kingdom focus, but mainstream churches have been slow to embrace this message. The rediscovery of the kingdom emphasis and

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<sup>27</sup> Gibbs p. 17

<sup>28</sup> Vincent J Donovan, *Christianity Rediscovered*, 3rd edn (London: SCM Press, 2001).

<sup>29</sup> Gibbs, pp. 17-18

<sup>30</sup> Gibbs, p. 18

the humanity of Jesus in the Gospels, rather the narrow message of personal salvation and how to get to heaven when one dies, makes more sense to people living in postmodern society. Due to the massive advances in medicine and healthcare during the twentieth century, people in contemporary western society, in contrast to those living in previous centuries, have very little contact with death. The focus on what happens when we die, prevalent in many mainstream churches as a hangover from previous centuries when people were surrounded by death in times of high infant mortality, lower life expectancy, and higher rates of infectious disease, is no longer relevant to post-moderns who are more concerned with having a good life in the present.

People in postmodern society see mainstream churches as too internally focused. In Aisthorpe's research, 40% of respondents perceived that the institution of the church was prioritising self-preservation over their core purpose for being.<sup>31</sup> Several others have also identified that the church is preoccupied with its own survival rather than growing God's Kingdom. Francis Chan<sup>32</sup> advocates no salaries, no buildings and Gibbs reports that emerging churches do not seek to start churches; rather they seek to foster communities that embody the kingdom, and therefore they question whether salaries for full-time ministry are part of that vision.<sup>33</sup>

The new postmodern culture requires new organisational structures. Mainstream churches are seen as too hierarchical and controlling by postmodern people who want the freedom to explore, question, experience and fully participate.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Aisthorpe, p. 195

<sup>32</sup> Chan, pp. 183-188

<sup>33</sup> Gibbs, p. 61

<sup>34</sup> Gibbs, pp. 155-172

Emerging churches also share the conviction that leadership must not be invested in one person.<sup>35 36</sup> A significant feature of new types of churches are that they tend to emerge from the 'bottom up'. Moynagh explores the nature of emergence in his book *Church in Life*, and shows how the Newtonian model of science that dominated management thinking in most organisations including the church, for most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century has been replaced by complexity thinking, where organisations are seen less as machines and more like organisms or networks of conversations.<sup>37</sup>

Those with a kingdom focus tend to feel that they need to be out in the world and in touch with all areas of life to bring God's Kingdom to all people and creation in all situations. They seek to be fruitful on their frontlines at work, school or wherever they find themselves,<sup>38</sup> not solely through the limited opportunities presented by the activities of mainstream church. The truth is that most people, even those heavily involved in church activities, spend the majority of their lives outside church. Mission is much more effective if it is permeated through every aspect of our lives. Aisthorpe illustrates this with the story of a man who decided to spend the morning in his community rather than going to church and the missional opportunities that resulted.<sup>39</sup>

The current model of model of a preacher addressing a congregation does not fit the postmodern's need to participate, express their views and question. It does not encourage and empower people to use their gifts and develop as disciples. We

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<sup>35</sup> Gibbs, p. 205

<sup>36</sup> Francis Chan, *LETTERS TO THE CHURCH* (Colorado Springs: DAVID C COOK, 2018), pp.118-120

<sup>37</sup> Michael Moynagh, *Church In Life: Emergence, Ecclesiology And Entrepreneurship* (London: SCM Press, 2017), pp.19-28

<sup>38</sup> Mark Greene, *Fruitfulness On The Frontline* (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 2014)

<sup>39</sup> Aisthorpe, p. 176



should be teaching others how to teach, rather than to passively listen, and Chan argues that the most effective way to achieve this is within small groups where people feel safe to discuss personal issues and be accountable to each other.<sup>40</sup> In addition, small informal groups are more flexible, dynamic and adaptable to the culture they are in and they can react quickly in response to the movement of the Holy Spirit and the needs of the people surrounding them. This was particularly evident during our visit to Newbiggin House in Winson Green, Birmingham this year where we witnessed the transformation of a whole community through the work of a relatively small group of people living a truly radical Christian lifestyle.

The concept of *missio Dei* recognises that God is much bigger than church and that we should be joining in with what God is already doing in the world. For example, there are many groups fighting injustice and supporting environmental causes who are not acting under the auspices of the Christian church but from an innate (God-given?) desire to improve our world.

Jamieson argues that post-church groups lose mission as a priority – though he seems to focus on mission as overseas development.<sup>41</sup> However, this may be due to differing understandings about mission; mainstream churches can be quite focused on mission as overseas development whereas people involved in kingdom-focused missional communities may be involved in small day-to-day actions on an individual basis that all contribute to the kingdom, but are not readily identifiable.

Aisthorpe points out that people leaving the church to be more missionally effective has been recurring pattern throughout much of the last 2000 years. Both

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<sup>40</sup> Chan, pp 181-192

<sup>41</sup> Jamieson, p. 166-170

the modal and the sodal forms are equally “church”, but the mainstream churches of today seems to have forgotten this fact. The church would do well to remember that the original expansion of Christianity across Europe was led by itinerant preachers and monastic movements and most of the overseas missions of the nineteenth century were initiated by organisations which were independent of mainstream church authorities<sup>42</sup>. Professor Andrew Walls suggests “that God seems to raise up sodal groups and organisations ... at times when the mainstream (modal) church is weak, ailing and, humanly speaking, confronting its possible demise”<sup>43</sup> which seems to me to reflect the current state of most mainstream churches in the West.

It should be recognised that there are currently huge tensions between the modal and sodal forms of church. The rapid, huge changes in culture are frightening to many people who are desperate for some stability in their lives. For many, the non-changing character of modal church provides security and reassurance and therefore they fight hard to resist any change within their churches.

On the other hand, many others who have embraced postmodernity do not see the relevance of mainstream church to their lives. Almost every aspect of mainstream church is counter-cultural in terms of post-modernity; including the organisational structure, communication methods, rational rather than experiential focus, the disempowering hierarchy, church focused rather than kingdom focused, and westernised rather than globalised.

Moynagh describes an example of a contemporary church that has attempted to reconcile the modal and sodal forms of church with some success. St George’s

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<sup>42</sup> Aisthorpe, p. 181

<sup>43</sup> Aisthorpe, p. 182

Church in Deal encourages the formation of new types of Christian community, each which exists to serve a specific group of people. These communities exist alongside the life of the existing congregation. From time to time the new communities and the long-established congregation meet together in forms of gathering that never existed before.<sup>44</sup> This celebration of both modes of church, living and working alongside each other, seems to me to indicate a very promising way forward in our postmodern culture.

In conclusion, the mainstream (modal) church has been slow to adapt to the huge and rapid cultural changes of last 70 years and this has resulted in a significant increase in the activity of sodal groups and organisations. It is concluded that these sodal forms of church are more effective in this postmodern era because the ability to react quickly to change is paramount to staying relevant in a rapidly changing society. However it is also important to recognise that there are many people who are struggling to keep pace with postmodern life and we need to develop stable communities for them in our changing world. Our broader vocation is “to enjoy God’s presence, do God’s will and be grateful wherever we are”<sup>45</sup> and it is important to recognise that people find God in a multitude of different places and activities. The crucial point to remember is that mission is God’s mission and that it is our job to listen and allow God to work through us. It is time for us to move from having an agenda to letting the Holy Spirit carry the agenda.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Moynagh, pp. 19-38

<sup>45</sup> Henri J. M Nouwen, Rebecca Laird and Michael J Christensen, *Discernment* (London: SPCK, 2013), p. 107

<sup>46</sup> Gibbs, p. 126