

# A PIONEER'S UNDERSTANDING OF THE CHURCH



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# 1

## INTRODUCTION

In 2004 the *Mission-shaped Church* report highlighted the need for an increased urgency for mission across the church, as well as pointing to inspiring stories of where this is already happening. This led to the emergence of the Fresh Expressions movement and the invitation for new communities and initiatives to be planted into places and contexts where Christendom has long since lost its influence.

The results so far have been tremendously encouraging and exciting, with fresh expressions of church arising in many forms across the social and cultural spectrum. And this variety of expressions has caused many to ask which are church and which are not? Is it a church if it only caters for children? Or is it a church if it doesn't meet on a Sunday? Or is it a church if it has no full-time leader?

In all the differing activities of the body of Christ, what are the non-negotiable facets of church that make it 'church'? As the Fresh Expressions movement grows these questions about what kind of church we plant are

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of supreme importance – what is essential and what can be negotiated?

This is, of course, the study of ecclesiology, and it's a very wide subject about which so much has been written. Also, much is taught on this in local churches and in other training processes, so you may well already have considerable background that you bring to these questions.

In this short workbook we do not try to cover the whole discussion, but we do want to encourage you to work through some of the foundational principles about the nature of the church, which we hope will help as you consider your own mission context and calling. This is based on biblical and historical sources, and is slanted towards some very practical analyses that may bring new light to the process of explaining and initiating mission-shaped churches.

In order to get the most out of this workbook and engage with the issues raised here in as healthy and rounded manner as possible, we would suggest you also work through other key church planting material that we do not have space to cover here. Important issues that run along-side include establishing vision and values, understanding mission spirituality, as well as building teams and community.

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There are plenty of good resources available on each of these, including an upcoming ACPI workbook on *Team Dynamics*, but perhaps the best training available that covers them all is the *mission shaped ministry* course. See [www.freshexpressions.org.uk](http://www.freshexpressions.org.uk) for details about how you and your team can become involved in a course running locally to you.

### **A STARTER FOR TEN**

As we go on we will consider a range of biblical and theological viewpoints of the church. But to get us started let us begin by considering one quote which can spark our thinking. It is from Archbishop Rowan Williams, taken from the introduction to the *Mission-shaped Church* report:

*If 'church' is what happens when people encounter the Risen Jesus and commit themselves to sustaining and deepening that encounter in their encounter with each other [and the world], there is plenty of theological room for diversity of rhythm and style ...* **Rowan Williams.**

We will revisit this quote again a little later as a summary of some of the key biblical pictures of the church. And in this context, right from the beginning of our thinking on this subject, it is easy to read these words and hear some of the most celebrated words of Jesus echoing behind what is spoken.

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As we encounter the Risen Jesus we are reminded of Jesus' promise that *'Surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age'* (Matthew 28:20). As we deepen that encounter with each other we are reminded of his assurance that, *'Where two or three come together in my name there am I with them'* (Matthew 18:20).

And as we seek to deepen that encounter with the world we are reminded that Jesus sends us *'two by two before him to every town and place he was about to go'* (Luke 10:1). He does this in order for us to find the people of peace – a third person to the two that are sent out – and so Jesus' model of pioneering mission is what grows the community of disciples and so defines his conception of church.

All that we are now going to look at is fundamentally built on this foundation.

# 2

## ECCLESIOLOGY FOR THE PRACTITIONER

Theology has gone on a journey in the last fifty years. Scholarship used to say that the epistles had the theology and the gospels had the story. Over time this has shifted so that now the primary source of theology is in the gospels and the life of Jesus, and the epistles then have the commentary of how the theology was developed and applied.

If this is right, it naturally follows that the gospels should also be the primary source of ecclesiology. However, despite this shift in theological understanding, most contemporary ecclesiology still looks to the epistles as the primary authority on the nature of the church.

Jesus should be the source and model for everything in the Christian life – understanding of God, personal walk with God (discipling), Christology, activity and theology of the church, relationship with the world, etc – and so the essential issue of the very essence of what the church is must also start with Christ.

Starting here, we can then build on Jesus as our foundation through the commentary that the books of Acts and the Epistles offer us. And it is significant that the most frequent picture we find there of the church is 'The Body of Christ'.

### **Why Should Ecclesiology be Vital?**

For many of us, we generally only take time to consider the nature of church in the context of focusing on the developmental growth of an existing local church. However, in doing this many explicit questions of ecclesiology can easily be missed or side-stepped, since essentially people are only concentrating on refining or extending the implicit model that is already at work for them. And even though it may quite possibly be ecclesio-logically defective, the local church's length of history, continuity of ministry, flywheel of activities and established bond of relationships will carry it through to the foreseeable future.

However, a new plant or fresh expression has none of these securities or historic assets nor any of the burdens that this history brings with it. To use an appropriate and familiar analogy, it is like an infant or child. The infant is bursting with life but it is still highly dependent and vulnerable. How they are nurtured and reared is of almost incalculable significance. All planters need to realise that every fresh expression has an

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implicit ecclesiology, inherited from its sponsoring body and the attitudes of its own initiating members.

Moreover, there is never any question of having no ecclesiology, only of whether it is healthy or unhealthy, partial or rounded – whether it is likely to lead to maturity and potential to reproduce further, true to its breeding, or whether it will lead to permanent adolescence, reactive rebellion, a disabled existence and at worst, premature death.

Not all plants and fresh expressions thrive or survive and, in our experience, ecclesiological reasons can often be the cause.

Where the analogy doesn't quite fit is that, unlike childbirth, we can largely determine what is created in 'church-birth'. Therefore, we are even more highly responsible to get it right. So it becomes vital to be able to recognise, evaluate and shape our ecclesiology right from the first conception of a church plant or fresh expression, and to continue to review and allow it to develop healthily throughout the life of the resulting community of faith.

To help us do this let us begin with the most fundamental ecclesiological question of them all – what is church?

# 3

## SO, WHAT IS CHURCH?

At a first glance this may seem a very elementary question, even an obvious question. Don't we all know?! After all, aren't we all part of one?! However, as we explore further we very quickly recognise that this is both a more complex and deeper question than it initially seems.

### **For reflection**

To get started in thinking about church, ask yourself this question: what words come to mind when you hear the word 'church'?

### **Notes:**

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So what did you come up with? When we have done this exercise with people before, we have found that many of the same answers are given – both good and bad – and your list may reflect some of these common suggestions.

Examples of ‘good’ words that regularly come up are:

- Community;
- Body;
- Priesthood;
- Disciples.

Whereas, examples of ‘bad’ or unhelpful words that are regularly offered as an immediate response to the word ‘church’, include:

- Building;
- Sunday;
- Ritual;
- Meetings.

Our experience of church can often prompt us to hold assumptions and stereotypes that are unhelpful. And we need to recognise that some of these fixed mental ideas may actually be hindrances to developing mission-shaped fresh expressions of church.

Our language and practice don’t help for a start. The most common use of the word ‘church’ is for a building and yet the church survived at least its first century with few if any purpose built church buildings.

## So, WHAT IS CHURCH?

Next, the word church conjures up a religious event on a special day of the week, but is that really the heart of it? It's so common to say "we are going to church" as though it were mostly somewhere else, rather than thinking that we are 'being church' and not 'doing' it. Indeed, we can find it quite difficult sometimes to describe the church without referring either to where or when it takes place, and so eventually we begin to assume that it is primarily about a series of events rather than a community of people.

As we build towards planting churches and fresh expressions, it is vital that we are clear about what sort of church we want to plant or become. What is of the essence of church, what is negotiable and what can, and perhaps needs to be, re-thought? This is the question we want to provoke you to ask as you consider your mission and church context.

In his excellent book *Building Mission Congregations*, Robert Warren offers us two contrasting equations of inherited and emerging models of church (see diagram opposite). Whilst it is a caricature, the common assumptions and the focus of our time, energy and money can push us so that church becomes centred around the summary in the left column. This, he suggests, is how the inherited church that we are most familiar with, has become centred.

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In the right hand column we see Warren's equation to reflect where the church needs to be headed, which we would want to characterise church plants and fresh expressions of church.

<b>Inherited Church</b>	<b>Emerging Church</b>
Church =	Church =
Building	Community
+	+
Priest	Faith
+	+
Stipend	Action

These 'equations' or summaries give us our first practical measure we can use as we consider our own situation. Are we in danger of building an ecclesiology around inherited assumptions as we plant new communities of faith? Or are we building the church on the vales of community, faith and action that has been highlighted by Warren as the path to a healthy emerging church?

These questions can help us to realign our perspective of what is important and how we invest our time, energy and money. Even more important, though, we need to remember that in exploring the nature of the church we are entering a divine love affair... and the

## So, WHAT IS CHURCH?

tender heart of God the lover is such that not even a tiny bird falls to the ground without him falling with it (one literal translation of Jesus' words in Matthew 6:26).

In the same way we can rest assured that as missional practitioners we dare to explore, God draws tenderly to our side, delighting in our journey, our revelations, our repentances, our successes and failures. And as He walks with us He can shape His church through us and for us.

### **For reflection**

Look at the equations on page 13. Which of these summaries best describes your current church experience?

## NOT AS WE KNOW IT

### **For reflection**

Which of the three 'Emerging church' characteristics do you feel your mission endeavour is strong in?

Which are you weak in? Do you have any initial ideas how to counter this?

# 4

## BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS

As we mentioned in chapter one, the church has always based its understanding of itself on biblical foundations. And though our understanding of how this should be applied is shifting from epistle-centred to gospel-centred, there is the continued constant standard that our values, motivation and action should be fundamentally biblical.

And we would suggest, in looking back at Robert Warren's two equations of church, that it is the second 'Emerging Church' equation that is the more biblical. It is therefore appropriate that before we look any further we first take a little time to remind ourselves of some biblical foundations that should shape our understanding of the church.

### **Old Testament ideas and themes**

In the Old Testament the word 'church' itself is not in use, but instead there are the People of God, and the whole Old Testament is devoted to their story, their

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ways, their values and how they embraced, worshipped, relied upon, rejected, forgot and otherwise related to their God.

As Christians we believe that this provides an evolving revelation which then finds its completion in the community that emerged around Jesus. So, what can we learn from this story of the People of God that points to what the church is today?

### **For reflection**

This is a question to consider ideally with a team around you and a bible open on your knees: What are some of the central pictures, concepts and characteristics of the Old Testament people of God that you can think of?

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You will probably have come up with more ideas than we have listed below, but here are a few key suggestions that we believe are important signposts to essential elements and characteristics of the church:

*Covenant, set-apart, tabernacle, son/family, law, nation, priesthood, vineyard, servant, prophets, holy, sacrifice, royal, land, worship, chosen, temple, flock, olive tree, etc.*

As you read through this list and consider the implications, also consider how many of these concepts/characteristics are related directly to the essence of the relationship between God and His people. The core values of what we would now recognise as the Old Testament church are very much centred on identity – knowing who God is and thereby discovering who we are.

Even the more building-related words are still relationship centred, highlighting the importance of building in time and space for God and His people to come together, on His terms.

In addition to this list, another aspect of the People of God that most of us forget is the Promised Land. The importance that the Old Testament people of God place on seeking, inhabiting and identifying with the Promised Land as an inheritance is a central idea throughout

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Israel's history and one which we draw on further later in understanding the church.

### **For reflection**

Which of these concepts/characteristics do you most identify with, and would most want to mark your new fresh expression of church?

How important is the idea of an inheritance of a 'Promised Land' in your current church experience?

## **New Testament pictures and parables**

As we come into the New Testament we again find the People of God being the focus, but now under a New Covenant. However, we find very little of the language of 'church' being attached to this new covenant community by Jesus. In fact, throughout the Gospels he only uses the word 'church' twice, both in Matthew. Rather than the character of the church being communicated through concepts, formulations or definitions, the early church came to understand itself through a series of parables and pictures given by Jesus and repeated and developed by the first apostles.

### **For reflection**

Now repeat the previous exercise, but this time asking for well-known pictures and parables that are used for the church in the New Testament.

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Again, you may find more than we suggest here, but here are a few of the most important:

*Vine, body, spiritual building, living stones, temple, light, salt, flock, holy nation, royal priesthood, household, field, city, the way saints, etc.*

Alongside these word pictures and parables should be set the central New Testament emphasis on the Jesus-centred community becoming and being His disciples,

### **For reflection**

Which of these New Testament pictures/parables do you feel are best expressed in your current church experience or evolving fresh expressions vision?

## **Some conclusions**

So what might we learn about the nature of the church from the pictures, parables, characteristics and concepts that the Bible gives us? Here are a few thoughts:

### **No blueprint or definition**

It is striking that Jesus only uses the word church twice. The first is with reference to the foundation on which it will be built, following the revelation of who Jesus is to Peter (Matthew 16:18). And the second is about how conflicts are to be resolved in the community (Matthew 18:17).

It is also most significant that nowhere does the New Testament give us a blueprint or a model for church, let alone a prescription of all its aspects and organisation. The fact that we are mainly offered pictures and analogies should tell us therefore that *it's actually not so much about **definition as description.***

So this should caution us against being prescriptive and point us to dig more for the essence.

### **It's essentially about the continuing life of Jesus**

Not only is it the most common or favourite New Testament picture of church, the Body of Christ, but

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several of the other pictures or parables of us as a church flow from how Jesus first describes himself. For example, here are a selection taken just from the book of John:

*I am the vine ... you are ...*

**John 15:5**

*I am the light of the world ... whoever follows me ...*

**John 8:12**

*My body is the temple that will be destroyed and rebuilt  
in three days ... you are ...*

**John 2:19-21**

*I am the door ... you are the sheepfold.*

**John 10:9**

*I am the good shepherd ... my sheep hear ...*

**John 10:14**

*I am the way ...*

**John 14:6**

This brings us back to our central conviction that our ecclesiology must begin in the gospels – we must start with Jesus and allow the church to be formed out of his

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life, shaped by his lifestyle, priorities and practises, and honouring him as our primary motivation.

As he said, wherever two or three are gathered in his name, there he is with them (Matthew 18:20). The church only exists and has an identity because of who Jesus is – we can only be branches so long as he is a vine, we can only be light if we are together indwelt by his light, and so on.

This central principle is further reinforced since the pictures of church, temple, Spiritual building and us as 'living stones' also make reference to Christ Jesus as both foundation and chief cornerstone. This in turn links to the understanding of missional spirituality, which is energised by the conviction of the reality of the living Jesus among us.

We would recommend reading Sue Hope's book *Mission-shaped Spirituality* for more on this.

### **An Archbishop's description**

With these conclusions we then shouldn't be surprised that the definition given by the Archbishop theologian Rowan Williams, in his foreword to *Mission-shaped Church* (and which we referred to in the introduction to this book), is both wide and general, and centred on the life of Jesus in and among us as church:

**'Church' is what happens when people encounter the Risen Jesus and commit themselves to sustaining and deepening that encounter in their encounter with each other (and the word).** Rowan Williams, *Mission-shaped Church*, p.vii.

**Bible study**

Do a study of the New Testament pictures and parables of the church which we have already identified.

Write down your reflections of the first things that come to mind:

**Bible study (continued)**

Write down your ideas of the ways that these pictures challenge how you have experienced church:

Write down your priorities for the sort of qualities you think are appropriate for your fresh expression:

# 5

## ECCLESIOLOGICAL SUMMARIES

### **Models of the church**

One of the recognised classical texts on the church is by Avery Dulles, entitled *Models of the Church*.

So, consistent with the biblical revelation, he does not try to give a single formulation or a structural prescription. Rather he describes a series of models or images of church. These he validates through an analytical process by reference to Scripture, tradition and a series of other tests of fruitfulness and relevance. Furthermore, he emphasises that not only can none of these images be taken on their own, but each should act as commentary and critique on each of the others. They are as follows:

### **The Institutional Church**

This model recognises the need for any grouping however organic to build supportive structures, patterns of authority and accountability. These are the aspects that provide order, consistency and continuity. This model is strongly emphasised in the historic parochial

system of church, but can also be found in more recent models such as cell church.

### **The Church as Mystical Communion**

This model draws on the biblical image of the Body of Christ. It is strong on the organic nature of the church and on its relational unity local and universal. It is the image of the People of God. This model can be discerned as formative in a lot of current emerging church expressions.

### **The Church as Sacrament or Sign**

Here Dulles describes his favourite model with its emphasis on the representative and priestly nature of the church. The communal worship life of the church is understood as having a sacramental ministry to the whole of society – and acting as a sign of the kingdom. This model is strongly emphasised in Catholic traditions.

### **The Church as a Herald**

The herald emphasises the role of the church with relation to the Word. This model centres on the place of the authoritative proclamation of Christ within and

beyond the church. This model has strong resonances within the Evangelical movement.

### **The Church as Servant**

The diaconal ecclesiology has emphasised the church as servant following her master's example. Here the church finds its identity in living for others and responding to needs. At the heart of this model is compassionate service and social transformation. Also in this model arises the debate as to whether the church is the servant of God rather than the world and whether her agenda of service is to call the world to serve God. Here there are strong connections with the liberal church tradition.

### **A multiplying community**

To this list George Lings and the *Mission-shaped Church* report<sup>1</sup> have added one other image or model of the church. Namely, 'A community mandated to reproduce and fill the earth towards the return of Christ'. George, in his original Masters Thesis (and now in his doctoral work), puts this quality of multiplication through all the Dulles tests and finds that it holds. Indeed, we might hear Jesus' parables about yeast (Matthew 13:33) and investing talents (Matthew 25:14-30) and see how he

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<sup>1</sup> *Mission-shaped Church*, chapter 5, p.93-95.

## ECCLESIOLOGICAL SUMMARIES

also highlighted how multiplication is an inherent kingdom dynamic. Now it will be obvious that this characteristic of a multiplying body provides both a motivating energy for planting fresh expressions of church but also a challenge to the internal dynamics within these churches.

### **For reflection**

Pick one of these models and reflect on how it is being expressed in your church or mission project.

## **Four dimensions of church life**

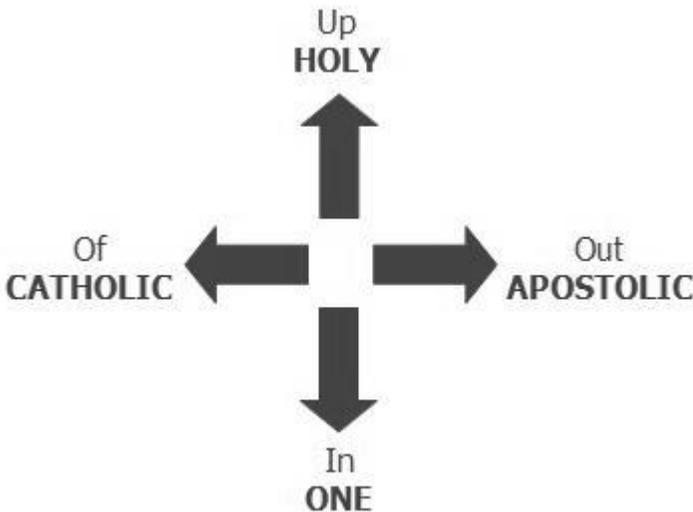
A growing corporate encounter with Jesus that Rowan Williams describes as the heart of church, leads us immediately to the relational nature of church. It was some thirty years ago that the church planter for Honduras, George Patterson, described church as a triangle of three relationships in dynamic interaction: *Upwards* to God, *Inwards* to one another and *Outwards* to the world.

In each case it is the *relationship* that is the key – our worship is based on a relationship with the living God; our church community is based on genuine relationships of love and support with one another that reflect the relationships within the Trinity; and in our mission to the world we are constrained by Christ’s love for and relationship with the people around us and the context in which he has placed us into.

These three relationships were then taken and expanded fifteen years ago by Mike Breen and built into his *LifeShapes* discipleship principles as signs of a three-dimensional Christian life ... UP, IN and OUT. And this has now more recently been further extended to add a fourth dimension (or relationship) by George Lings (again included in *Mission-shaped Church*). It thus becomes UP, IN, OUT and OF - the OF dimension being our relationship to the worldwide and historic universal church... the whole body of Christ in time and space.

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Most significantly, chapter five and pages 96–99 of the report then relate each of these four relationships to the four defining marks of church summed up in the historic creeds. The upward relationship being that which links the church to the HOLY; the inward which builds a community that is ONE; the 'of' dimension inter-connecting us as CATHOLIC; and the outward dimension expressing our APOSTOLIC calling.



Transposing the four 'compass points' of the church over these four defining marks highlights the defining importance of each and raises the significant question, can it truly be considered church if it doesn't display each of these marks? As well as being a controversial question this may also be unhelpful since babies only display very limited forms of some human characteristics but are no less human for that. However,

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as four guiding principles to steer by in developing fresh expressions of church they are invaluable. Furthermore, it is perhaps easier to agree that anything which does display them all is a full expression of church.

This being the case, it brings us back to the crucial question of what is negotiable and non-negotiable as we see missional church emerge, and it potentially opens the doors for new creativity as we build community in de-churched and non-churched contexts.

We should also bear in mind at this point that for those of us coming at this 'what is church?' question from the perspective of starting fresh expressions of church, that there is a key difference between where you start and where you end up. Fresh expressions of church are 'fresh' in the sense of a child being a 'fresh expression of a person' - they are the next generation, based on the parent but uniquely individual and, crucially, not yet fully matured into what they will become.

Therefore, as we progress on the fresh expressions journey it may be appropriate to start by focusing on two or three of the marks, giving space and time for the rest to emerge as the fresh expressions develops into a mature expression of church.

That being said, this shouldn't be used as an excuse to 'leave the OUT until later', which does seem to happen quite often. The trouble with this is that without mission

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and evangelism there at the start, it is missed out of the core identity and values of the community, and our experience has shown us that it is very difficult to bring it in effectively later. Really it needs to be there at the start. Also, we shouldn't neglect the OF dimension as disconnected new forms of church will become unhelpfully independent and weak.

### **For reflection**

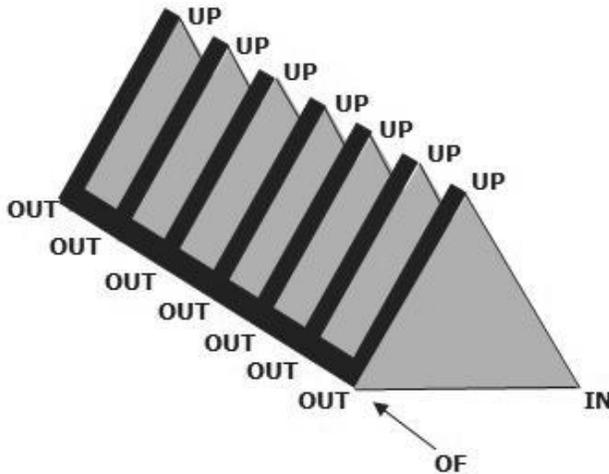
Which of the four dimensions is weakest and which strongest in your current church experience or planned fresh expression?

How could you strengthen the weaker dimension(s)?

## **Toblerone church**

Another representation that George Lings has suggested is the 'Toblerone Church'. This takes these four relationships off the flat page and makes it three dimensional.

This also has merit for identifying that each expression of church needs its own strong life of worship, community and mission in a triangle but all the triangles/church expressions need to build relationships to all other expressions through geography, culture and history.



## **What works best at what size?**

This is a question that is often raised when we have taught on these four dimensions/relationships of

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church. Do different sizes of community lend themselves to different 'compass points'? The answer, as so often seems to be the case, is always 'it depends!' To begin with it depends on how your particular community is formed.

If there is just one gathering (or at least a strongly dominant gathering) of the whole church then there is a higher priority for seeing all four 'compass points' clearly expressed. However, in a context that includes different sizes, the growing new church gathering and expressing its shared life in all sorts of forms and then there may be opportunities for groups to focus more on one or two over the others.

For example, there are many churches that have cells or small groups as places of personal evangelism and/or discipleship. And some churches gather these cells around mission vision into missional communities (often called 'clusters'). In such churches it is often the case that, though they all operate through all four dimensions, the whole church gathering does this through focusing on the UP; the cluster expresses all four through the lens of the OUT; and the cell through the IN focus – with all relating to one another to express the OF dimension. Here the large worship gathering looks UP to God and is inspired to pass on the love they receive to one another (IN) and to the world (OUT); the experience of the cluster in mission leads to celebration of what God has done or prayer for

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breakthrough or in times of difficulty (UP), as well as mutual support and sharing testimony (IN); and the discipleship in cells spurs people to live a life of worship (UP) and to respond to the call to make new disciples as they pass on what they have received (OUT).

However, these are only examples and there really are no rules. Probably it mainly depends on the hopes and intentions of the different community sizes in the church. For some, small groups are exclusively a place of belonging and discipleship, and would never see themselves as an expression of church as such. Other cell churches see the cell as the first and most important place that church is expressed, and in this case all four dimensions are more likely to be necessary at this level, whereas the celebration gathering may be more limited to an Upward focus. There are, of course, a range of expressions that fall between these two extremes and the same applies for other community sizes.

As we have already pointed out, there will be many disagreements as to whether all four need to be present for it to be considered 'church', but where all four dimensions can be identified as being present and fruitful – be that in one gathered group or dispersed across many – Jesus' community of faith can certainly be considered to be a fully rounded expression of church.

# 6

## A QUESTION OF TERRITORY

Over the centuries different traditions within the church have emphasized contrasting aspects of the nature of church. Sometimes these have resulted in strongly held opposing positions that have contributed to divisions within the wider church and they have also partly characterized denominational distinctions.

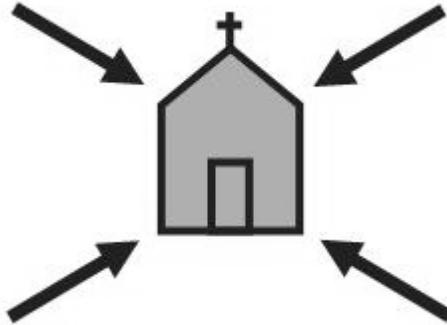
In the next three chapters we are going to explore three pairs of polarized conceptions. We have chosen them because they profoundly affect the practical way that we do church and hence are very relevant to actual decisions we need to make in developing mission-shaped churches or how we plant fresh expressions of church.

In exploring these polarizations we need to be clear that there are a whole range of interpretations between the extremes of each case. To quickly understand the issues we shall take characteristics that are widely divergent, are over simplified and so need to be understood as a bit of a caricature of these extremes.

## **Gathered church or church of the land?**

The first of our three polarizations looks at what we might call the 'territory' of the church. The two poles in this case are the 'gathered church' and the 'church of the land.' We might define these as follows:

### **Gathered church**



Some churches and streams emphasize that their key identity is in who they are as a group coming together. Their self-understanding is defined by what they are and do together. Historically this will mean their emphasis is on their quality of community and worship at their religious events and the quantity of people that they draw together.

For this understanding of church, so long as this congregation is healthy and growing there may not be any great importance attached to where these people

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come from in terms of geography or sociology. There may also be less concern about connection to other expressions of church.

### **Church of the land**



At the other extreme is the view that draws on one understanding of parish based churches. As the description suggests there is a strong ownership of geography associated with a sense of responsibility for everyone living there. Linked to this may be the understanding that the representative and priestly role of priest and people rightly administering word and sacraments in the parish church building is effective in churching and sanctifying the whole parish.

**For reflection**

Have you ever/are you currently in a church that lives according to either of these characteristics?

In terms of the four dimensions of church, where might the gathered church have a tendency to be strong and weak?

In terms of the four dimensions of church, where might the church of the land have a tendency to be strong and weak?

### **Associated biblical themes/pictures**

It can be easy for us to look at each of these polarisations and assume that one is more biblical than the other, when in fact we are only basing this opinion on our own values, experience, preferences and context rather than really considering how the biblical and historical church worked.

In fact, both polarizations have emerged from biblical roots, each being drawn from and healthily expressing different themes and pictures that we explored in Chapter 3 and are right at the heart of the church's identity.

We might look at the 'gathered church' and see how it distinguishes the church as holy, set apart – a chosen nation that lives against the tide of secular culture. Images of the 'sheep fold' and the 'city on a hill' stand out as being reflected strongly in this view of church. These are all vital identities of a biblically minded body of Christ.

However, we can also look at the 'church of the land' and see biblical themes such as priesthood and taking hold of the Promised Land at the heart of this polarization. Images of being a light to the nations, a servant to the world, define what the 'church of the land' is all about, and are clearly essential elements of a biblical church.

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So we must recognise that each can be biblical when seen properly in the context of the four 'compass points' of church that we explored earlier. It is then our particular values and context that can determine which polarization we personally tend towards for our particular church community.

### **Biblical themes/pictures of the church**

#### **Gathered**

Holy  
Set Apart  
Chosen Nation  
Sheep Fold  
City on a Hill

#### **Land**

Priesthood  
Promised Land  
Light to Nations  
Servant

### **Strengths and dangers**

That being said, a preference for one over another can be based on more than biblical objections, and it is also important to recognise that each have their positive and negative aspects. Whichever polarization we prefer, it is important to know these so we might stand the best chance of making the most of opportunities and avoiding the potential pitfalls.

Let us first consider 'gathered church.' Opponents may be dismissive saying, 'Oh it's only gathered church...

## A QUESTION OF TERRITORY

there's no outward definition' - the potential weakness here being that where no mission focus is owned, there can be a lack of mission engagement, only valuing individual evangelism. On the other hand, a strength can be that the gathered emphasis may enable a motivation to be counter-cultural. Another weakness can be the lack of recognition of inter-dependence with other expressions.

The other pole - 'church of the land' - clearly owns a field of ministry but may struggle with evangelism. It may so identify with the whole population that it presents no challenge. The gathered church can become a *clique* whilst the church of the land can tend towards *compromise*.

So this polarization illustrates at least two dangers:

- i) If we emphasise only the gathered nature of church we risk being isolated from any chosen community and we have insufficient focus for our missionary function;
- ii) On the other hand if we emphasise only some of the church of the land understanding and practice, we may avoid living counter-culturally among our chosen community and we then have no power to bring into effect our missionary function.

## NOT AS WE KNOW IT

### Strengths and dangers

#### ***Gathered***

 No mission focus

 Resource for mission

 Clique

 Distinct

#### ***Land***

 Clear mission focus

 Lack power for mission

 Compromise

 Engaged

### **Biblical resolution of the polarization**

It will be clear that both sides of the debate have plenty of biblical warrant. So it should be clear that consistent with Hebrew thought (biblical rather than Greek patterns of logic) we have to find ways of holding the two in tension.

One of Jesus' pictures/parables of church gives us a very helpful synthesis here. Jesus says, 'You are the salt of the earth'. Many preachers take modern uses to expand this ... like flavouring and preservative ... and no doubt there is truth here. But actually Jesus refers to the first century uses of salt that he has in mind (Luke 14:34-5). He says that if salt loses its saltiness it is no good for the ground or the dung heap.

Salt in his day came from evaporation of lakes and contained a whole range of salts that acted when

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applied to the soil as fertilizer for crops. So the picture is of the church giving growth, life and multiplication. But to do its work it has to be truly spread out on the land – **dispersed and engaged**.

There was another common use for salt in Jesus' day. In the absence of plumbed toilets there was instead a dung heap outside the house and rather than pull the flush, you sprinkled from a bowl of salt. Here the picture is of disinfecting. The church is meant to bring a moral corrective to its context. But for this use to work it has to be concentrated in order to cleanse! This is the picture of the church gathered – to cure by **together** living strongly **distinct** values.

### **The salt of the earth...**

#### **On the soil**

Fertilises  
Gives life  
Multiplication  
Moral  
Use spread out

#### **On the dung heap**

Disinfects  
Cures  
Corrective  
Use concentrated

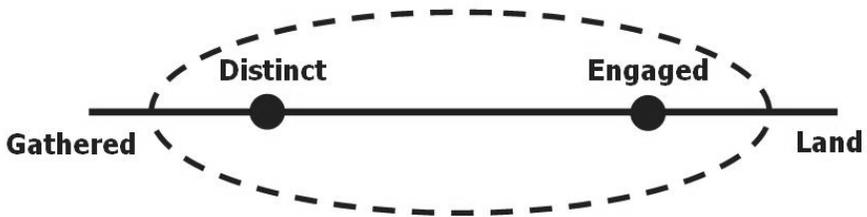
### **Being mission-shaped combines both**

So how do we rationalise these two seemingly opposing yet biblical pictures? Well, we believe that both sets of

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values can be present and productive so long as church holds mission at the heart of its purpose and identity. The diagram below, which we have adapted from Robert Warren's *Building Missionary Congregations* addresses the importance of working to hold these two poles together so that both are expressed in a mission-shaped church. His argument is that like any elliptical form, which needs two points of tension to give its shape, the church also needs the two focal points of being distinctive from and engaged with the community it serves. Only then does the church fit the shape God intended.

### Mission-shaped combines both



*Gathered only ... isolated... not **SENT OUT***  
*Land only ... indistinct ... not **CALLED OUT***

We can conclude that we have to find ways for the church to be both distinctive and engaged. If we draw only on an understanding of the church of the land we

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may be indistinct and fail to be **called-out**. If we only draw on gathered insights we may be isolated and fail to be **sent out**. Robert also makes the point that social context can favour one pole over and against the other. For example, in rural situations the engaged church identifying with the whole village has advantages whereas in diverse, amorphous mobile, urban situations, the gathered characteristics have strengths.

### **For reflection**

Where does your church stand in terms of the gathered/land principles?

# 7

## BOUNDED OR CENTRED SET?

These next two polarisations are models that sociologists use to describe the way human communities organize themselves. As with the previous couplet, they are in fact opposite ends of a scale and social institutions can be at different points along the continuum.

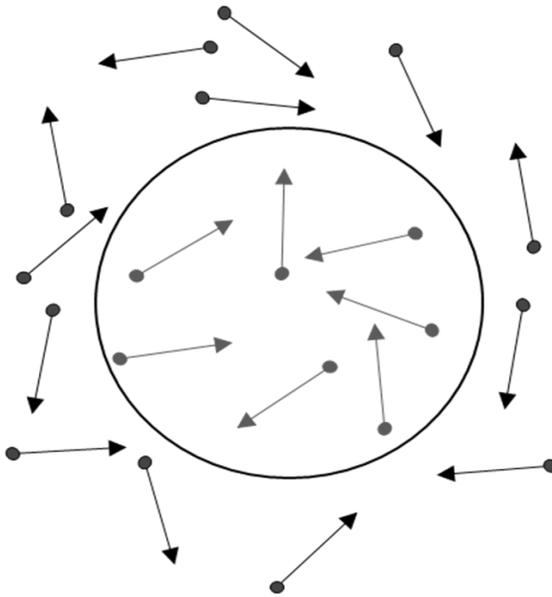
Although these classifications come from sociology they are very illuminating of our theology of church and again highlight really practical issues for how we can become a more mission-minded church and more appropriate to our context, in either existing or fresh expressions of church.

### **Bounded Set**

By contrast, at the other end of the spectrum are social groups that emphasise their understanding and practice on a sharp definition of who is 'in' and who is 'out'. This distinct boundary enables them to know clearly who constitutes 'us' and to ensure a degree of conformity.

## BOUNDED OR CENTRED SET?

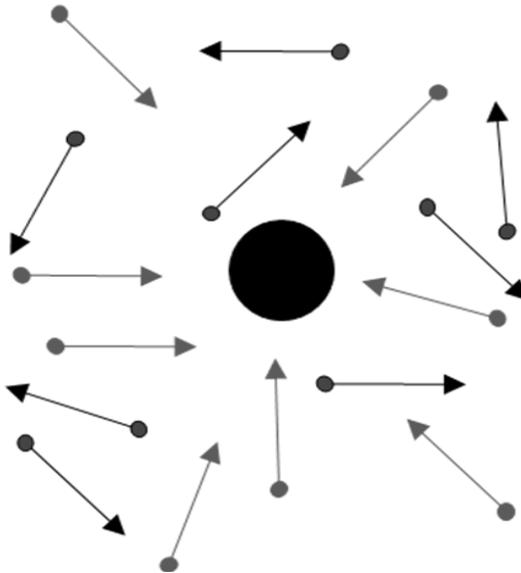
In such churches the boundary may be a spiritual experience (speaking in tongues), a religious rite (adult baptism by immersion), a doctrinal consent (accepting statements of faith), or a combination of these. These sorts of church by contrast are likely to have more attendees than members.



An extreme example of bounded set church would be the exclusive brethren. You need to know who is 'in' and 'out', not least because you can only eat together with insiders.

## Centred Set

Briefly, this is a social group that primarily understands and organizes itself with reference to a strong unifying centre. Providing you are moving toward the centre, you are seen as members, as part of 'us', whether closer or more distant. Typically one could see (national) churches like Anglican, Lutheran and Catholic in this way. Provided there is an identification with being C of E or Roman Catholic, etc, you are accepted as members, however strong or weak your active involvement may be. Classically a centred-set church has more members than attendees.



## BOUNDED OR CENTRED SET?

### **For reflection...**

Have you been/are you currently in a church context that feels like either centred or bounded set?

### **Strengths and dangers**

So we have extremes of a unifying centre and a defining/excluding circumference. The strength of the sense of open welcome and inclusiveness of the centred set church may be offset by nominalism and a lack of cohesion. Whilst the bounded set may be clearer, giving more certainty to who you can call on and security in the context of persecution, but may appear sectish elsewhere. Working with addicts will involve a welcome but you may need clear boundaries for those who wish to make a journey of discipleship.

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### Strengths and dangers

#### *Centred set*

-  Open welcome
-  Nominalism
-  Lacks cohesion
-  Journey

#### *Bounded set*

-  Excluding/sectish
-  Clarity
-  Cohesion
-  Arrived

### **Biblical associations**

Again, as with our previous couplet, it can be all too easy to assume that, because we have a preference, it must be the more biblical view point. But again, both values have arisen from biblical roots.

In the case of the 'centred set' approach, we need look no further than Jesus' opening invitation of his ministry to 'Come follow me' (Matthew 4:19; Mark 1:17; Luke 5:27). Few additional conditions are set as to who can do the following and so many do follow Jesus, from all walks of life and differing levels of apparent 'sinfulness'. This is given further weight as we identify Jesus as the 'friend of sinners' (Matthew 11:19; Luke 7:34). Even broader than this is Jesus teaching his disciples that 'whoever is not against us is for us' (Mark 9:40). All of these build to a picture of a church that only exists so

## BOUNDED OR CENTRED SET?

long as it is centred around Jesus and invites anyone and everyone to follow him.

On the other hand, the bounded set pole recognises that Jesus spoke about the need to 'repent and believe' (Mark 1:15). We also see Jesus telling the adulterous woman to 'go now and leave your life of sin' (John 8:11); Paul exhorting the Corinthian church, 'Do not be yoked together with unbelievers' (1 Corinthians 6:14); and Jesus seemingly opposing his statement from Mark 9:40 by saying, 'He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me scatters' (Matthew 12:30).

So again, we have two apparently conflicting values of church that are expressed and held in tension in the life and ministry of Jesus.

### **Biblical associations**

#### **Centred set**

Those not against  
are for  
Follow me  
Friend of sinners

#### **Bounded set**

Those not for are  
against  
Be not yoked  
Come out from among

## **Biblical resolution of the polarization**

By now you are probably getting the message that biblical (Hebrew) truth holds together apparent opposites. And yet they do not seem to work entirely as opposites as it isn't a case of one being effective and the other ineffective. We have already recognised that mission context may influence you to emphasize one or other aspect, but observation and research confirm that there are churches expressing each model quite strongly where God seems to be blessing with life and health.

So perhaps we need to look a little closer at how these two apparent opposites might relate to one another, and so develop another dimension of appropriately becoming mission-shaped. The key to this is to see a deeper truth that holds together aspects of both poles but which depends on a dynamic and not a static tension. This would essentially say two things:

- That there should be a strong centred identity ... but the key being what that centre is (and it's not the denomination);
- That there should also be a boundary ... but the key is who sets it.

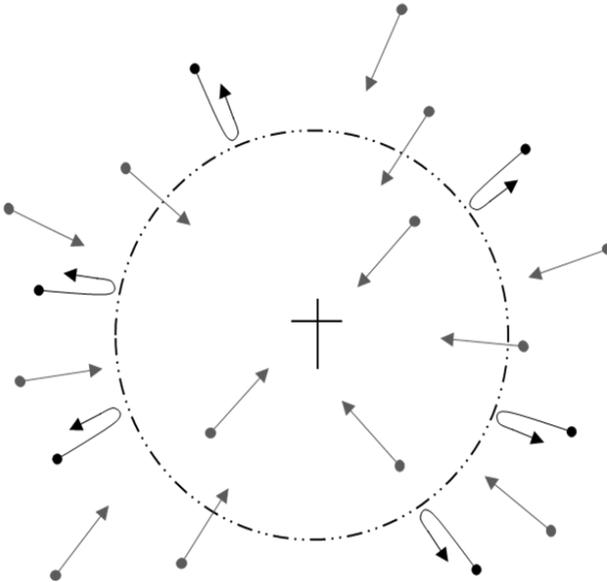
Consider a church where the unifying centre is the clear challenge of the person of Jesus and his call to a journey of discovering self-denying discipleship. Then

## BOUNDED OR CENTRED SET?

the boundary is set by each individual as they are ready or not to embrace the evolving challenge.

We can see this dynamic working out in the Gospels as different people were drawn to Jesus but then found their threshold (i.e. the rich young ruler [Luke 18:18-27], those wanting first to see to other priorities such as burying their dead [Matthew 8:21-22] and, supremely, the twelve in John 6:60, 66-69 - 'Will you too now turn back?' ... 'Where else will we find the words of eternal life?')

### **A synthesis of centred and bounded**



## **The 'belong, believe, behave' progression**

Many will be familiar with this catchy triplet, and we can certainly develop a link between these insights and the bounded set and centred set models.

In much of today's western culture the centred set fits with what often seems to be best mission practice - bringing people to belong and even make an active contribution, before any clear believing response is expected; and later looking to disciple a changed behaviour lifestyle. However, again we are challenged to remember that context is a priority for a mission-shaped church so that where there is persecution we may be looking for a believing response first, which we will only trust as genuine when it results in changed behaviour; and so only then will we give a fully open welcome of belonging.

## BOUNDED OR CENTRED SET?

### **For reflection**

Where does your church/fresh expression stand in terms of the bounded / centred set principles?

Is this appropriate? Is any change needed?

# 8

## SODALITY AND MODALITY

A third polarisation that has been a crucial contribution of mission thinking and experience has been an understanding of sodal and modal identity. For some these technical terms will be so established that the difference between them requires no explanation, but for most these will likely be new words, if not new concepts.

To make it easy we could simplify by distinguishing task-focused (sodal) and people-focused (modal), although there is much more than that.

### **Sodality**

A sodality is a form of church whose identity is centred and formed around a particular objective or specialist task. Perhaps we can see it best by taking a secular example – the Fire Brigade. It's a body of people totally focused on a task – safely putting out fires. They work as team with clear selection criteria, allocated jobs, distinctive uniform ... you can't just roll up and expect a

## SODALITY AND MODALITY

welcome! In the past the dominant expressions of this have been found in mission organisations (such as CMS, BMS, etc) and specialised ministries (e.g. prison ministry).

### **Modality**

In contrast, a modality is a group whose identity and purpose is centred and formed around people and their quality of life and relationships. Here again a secular example would illustrate – a block of flats or neighbourhood organisation. It's a body of people primarily organised to keep most of them happy for as much as possible. Over time in the West, local churches whether in dioceses or districts, deaneries or circuits, gathered or land, have tended to this.

### **Biblical and Historical Examples**

So the sodal expressions of church are more about the task of getting the church to where it hasn't yet reached and transformed culture, whereas the modal expressions of church are more about the goal of building up the members and creating quality of community.

Probably the most compelling biblical example of a sodal approach to church is provided by Paul's

## NOT AS WE KNOW IT

missionary bands and the details of the church planting teams in Acts. These trans-local task-focused, high commitment teams were called out from local churches, in twos were agents of planting local churches, but themselves were quite distinct from local churches where all were welcome and so had more modal qualities.

### **Strategic contrast and significance**

Mission thinkers like Ralph Winter have analysed these two modes of church and their significance over the centuries and particularly for today's mission challenges. Their analysis has drawn out two contrasting but equally significant impacts of a sodal and modal understanding.

First, this understanding recovers the sense that all these expressions are church – 'para-church' is a quite erroneous concept. It's all the corporate life of Jesus – modal church and sodal church complementing one another.

This point is reinforced by Paul's own teaching on the variety of ministries and gifts within the body of Christ, each tailored to fulfil a different role. Think of the differing tendencies of apostles and evangelists (a more sodal viewpoint), as opposed to pastor and teachers (more modal), which Paul mentions in Ephesians 4 and

## SODALITY AND MODALITY

we then see in action throughout Acts – the maturing of the church is only fully realised when all ministries are present.

In contrast, this understanding also enables us to recognise the necessary phases of planting a fresh expression of church, where each quality should be the specific focus at differing stages of development. The vision is for both of these approaches to be equally influential as the expression matures but to get there it is important to see where the strengths of each fit in the planting process.

In the early stages the main emphasis is likely to be more task-orientated, focusing on the need to form a strong team and to ensure the best possible foundations are laid. This calls for sodal thinking and practice.

But then later, as the fresh expression matures, moving into a focus on welcoming and incorporating any and all contacts, the emphasis naturally shifts to community, requiring modal thinking and practice.

Clearly there are overlaps (team forming is a task but is also highly relational) but nonetheless there does need to be a clear understanding of how one's approach both dictates and follows the process and pace of planting, and how the focus needs to shift from sodal to modal to help this along. The skill is to manage this gradual transition.

## **Implications for your context?**

As with the previous couplets, it is not a case of one being right and one being wrong, but rather a case of which works best for your context. This will be influenced by different factors, including whether your context is broadly a neighbourhood or network focused community; your vision for connecting with this community as well as the core values that are held within your team.

### **For reflection**

Where does your church stand in terms of the sodality/modality principles?

# 9

## CONCLUSION & REFLECTION

It is important to recognise that there are distinct priorities as we reflect on the questions of 'What is church?' and 'What sort of church should a fresh expression be?' Some truths relate to the very essence of church and are non-negotiable. Others may be very important and allow only slight variation and adaptation. And then there are those that should be much more a matter of being determined according to the mission context.

There are different ways to classify which truths fit into which category. Some missionary movements have used the dictum that 'the commands of Christ are essential, the early apostolic practices are desirable, whilst the rest is negotiable'. Another dictum exhorts us that 'in essentials unity; in non-essentials diversity and in all things charity'.

What follows now, at the end of this workbook, are some final questions to work through to help you consider some of the key implications of the principles raised here for your particular context or fresh expression of church. We would suggest that the ideal would be to work through them with any team you are a part of, and to regularly revisit all the principles and

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challenges addressed in this workbook as you continue your mission-shaped church journey.

### **For reflection**

Can you think of things that we have looked at which fit into first, second and third order truths about the church? (i.e. which are the non-negotiables, which are important but not deal breakers, which are more determined by mission context or phase of mission engagement?)

## CONCLUSION AND REFLECTION

### **For reflection**

How could the insights explored in this workbook lead you to strengthen your expression of church?

Give special thought to how mission can be enhanced. Write down your ideas with details of any plans that may emerge.

**For reflection**

Discuss together with your team what you have learnt about models of church. Consider together which models most fit your existing church and what changes of emphasis you might want to make in any fresh expression of church you may be planning.

Are you in your denomination or stream because you agree with its beliefs and practices more than those of other denominations?

## CONCLUSION AND REFLECTION

### **For reflection**

If not what are your reasons for being part of it?  
How do you understand loyalty, order and being under authority?

Consider how these will be worked out as you plant a fresh expression within your denomination or stream.

# 10

## FINAL WORDS

Whilst writing this workbook we read an article by Rowan Williams, released in *Mixed Economy* (the journal of Fresh Expressions), in which he addressed how fresh expressions of church challenge us to consider our own understanding of what the church really is. It was an excellent article and we felt it appropriate to end with a few of his words, which we found both extremely relevant to this workbook and inspiring:

*Renewal for the Christian community is never simply a matter of doing the same things better... it's also about finding what new shapes for our life together are created under the pressure of mission.*

*Fresh Expressions has encouraged two attitudes that I believe to be vital for a healthy Church. It has helped us to be positive about the variety of ways in which the call of Jesus Christ can be heard ... and it has helped us pay real and costly attention to the real questions and the real agenda of those with whom we want to share the Good News.*

*The New Testament and early Christian history already show us plenty of instances where the new life of the gospel community comes to life in*

## FINAL WORDS

*unexpected ways, some of them lasting, some transient.*

*There is no need to panic at the thought of risk and even at the thought that what we come up with is liable to change drastically or even disappear in the form we know it.*

*We need to have a clear and robust understanding of what the Church really is. It is not, in the New Testament, a carefully constructed human society ... Instead it is what happens when the news and the presence of Jesus, raised from the dead, impact upon the human scene, drawing people together in a relationship that changes everyone involved ... in ways that can be painful and demanding but are also life-giving and transforming beyond imagination.*

*The 'strength' of the Church is never anything other than the strength of the presence of the Risen Jesus.*

*Is it really Church? Is this a place and a community where people are expecting the Risen Jesus to be tangibly at work and the Holy Spirit making a difference? Is this a place and a community where people can begin to see that what makes the Church what it is and holds it together is the sheer strength of God's promise and invitation through the living Jesus.*

# APPENDIX I

## Some Recommended Reading

*Mission-shaped Church*, CHP, 2004, chapter 5.

*Called to Love and Praise*, MPH, 1996.

Steven Croft, *Transforming Communities*, DLT, 2002, chapters 7, 8, 9 and 10.

Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church*, Gill and MacMillan, 1976.

Kevin Giles, *What on Earth is the Church?*, SPCK, 1995.

Michael Nazir Ali, *Shapes of the Church to Come*, Kingsway, 2001, especially chapters 3 and 4.

Leslie Newbigin, *The Household of God*, SPCK, 1953.

John V. Taylor, *The Go-Between God*, SCM, 1972, chapter 7.

Robert Warren, *Building Missionary Congregations*, CHP, 1995.

David Watson, *I Believe in the Church*, Hodder and Stoughton, 1978.

Rowan Williams, 'Theological resources for re-examining church' in *The Future of the Parish System*, ed. Steven Croft, CHP, 2006.

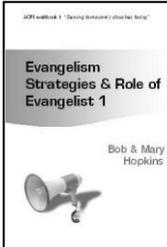
*Encounters on the Edge* series, especially issues 5 & 36 (though the whole series is extremely relevant) The Sheffield Centre/Church Army (available from [www.encountersontheedge.org.uk](http://www.encountersontheedge.org.uk)).

Sara Savage & Eolene Boyd-MacMillan, *The Human Face of Church*, Canterbury Press, 2007.



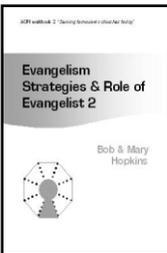
# APPENDIX II

## Other Workbooks in this Series



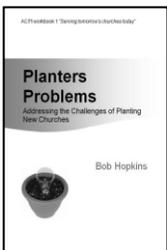
### **Workbook 1: Evangelism Strategies & Role of Evangelist 1** *(Written by Bob & Mary Hopkins)*

The first in a two-part series exploring strategies that will open up evangelism for all, this workbook considers the biblical bases for evangelism, especially Jesus' principles and how they can apply to the many opportunities for evangelism open to the church today.



### **Workbook 2: Evangelism Strategies & Role of Evangelist 2** *(Written by Bob & Mary Hopkins)*

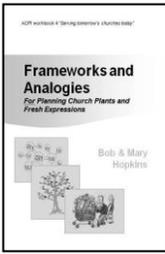
Part two of the Strategies for Evangelism workbook series. This booklet particularly focuses on exploring an eight-sided shape to help us understand and implement evangelism in our lives.



### **Workbook 3: Planters Problems** *(Written by Bob Hopkins)*

This workbook explores some of the lessons learned from areas of weakness and hard experience of the past, looking at how we can move forwards in greater strength to see new churches and fresh expressions planted.

## FINAL WORDS



### **Workbook 4: Frameworks & Analogies** *(written by Bob & Mary Hopkins)*

This fourth workbook highlights the importance of a continued priority placed on planning and strategic frameworks in the engaged and emerging church. This is built on by exploring six planning frameworks and analogies that have been used over the years and continue to be helpful today.

These resources, plus more related books, articles and stories are available from [www.acpi.org.uk](http://www.acpi.org.uk)



## FINAL WORDS