

## Changing all our instincts - “Stop starting with Church!”

The trouble with us humans is that what we pick up and learn subconsciously through socialisation often affects us more than our formal learning, and certainly far more than we realise.

This is definitely true of our understanding of church and mission. Although we have become increasingly aware of the priority and call to mission, so much of the lives and experiences of church leaders revolves around church that we are often blind to its conforming power. And this blindness crucially disables us for that very task of mission.

### Recent Historical Introduction

Here we explore some of the developments of the last half-century or more, and the associated evolving insights that have emerged along the way. These are clearly only part of the picture and we reflect on them through the lens of our particular journey.

Having come back to a living faith in Jesus in the early 70's, we quite soon felt called as missionaries to England. This call soon became focussed on church planting, first as I read through the book of Acts and then as we heard returning missionaries from Thailand telling of their journey of planting small indigenous churches as they went on their bicycles 'from village to village'. Learning from the Church Growth movement and the 'Decade of Evangelism', insights also came from the national 'Springboard' initiative and team. Further lessons were learnt from the challenges of a call in 1983 for us to move from commuter-land South East to deprived inner-urban Merseyside in the North West. Exploring pioneering in that very different context seemed to present a greater culture shock than our previous 3 years living in Brazil, where we stayed in our professional middle-class culture! And this experience also began an erosion of areas of our cultural pride and blindness, as well as any confidence we had about what church should be like in order to thrive in such a 'non-book' culture.

This journey of discovery, learning from failures more than successes, led me in the late 80's to coin this slogan ... “We need to stop starting with Church!”. It is interesting to note some parallels here with a somewhat famous national Anglican report published later in 2004. When published, its title was “Mission-shaped Church”. Which is another way of saying what I had expressed in my conviction of the need to “Stop starting with Church!”. It is even more interesting that the working group that produced that report originally intended the title to be “Dying to Live”. They based this on Jesus' truth expressed in John 12 v 24... that “unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies it remains alone, but if it dies, it yields many seeds!” And this encapsulated the theological truth that resurrection life is preceded by death. This principle was referenced in the report's introduction, concluding that the Spirit initiated church planting movement which the report chronicled, involved a letting go of cherished conceptions of 'inherited church' if we were to discover the appropriately novel expressions of Church for our time.

This is further in harmony with George Careys keynote to the second National Anglican Church Planting Conference that we organised at HTB in 1988. His opening challenge was that “you can have as high a view of church as you like, so long as your view of mission is higher. And you can have as high a view of mission, so long as your view of the Kingdom is higher. And you can have as high a view of the Kingdom, as long as your view of THE KING is higher!”

### One View of the Missional Shifts Needed

Now during this journey on into the 90's, as I grew in the assessment and conviction that we needed to “stop starting with Church”, a visualisation of an image built up in my mind. This combined a succession of observations made by us and others, of our UK mission field and various developing responses to the continuing decadal decline in church attendance. At the time, I shared many of these ideas and the

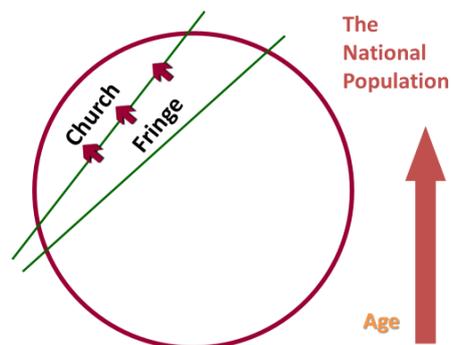
diagrams that encapsulated them (originally in OHP's!) in a teaching with the CPAS evangelism team. Shortly after, Rev Anne Hibbert asked to use them in her presentation to a national Conference in Brighton, I think in 1995.

I unpacked and explained this visualisation in the following way.

Analysis and research before the 80's had recognised that every local church congregation had 'a fringe'. People, not part of the regular congregations but, with all sorts of relationships and connections with attenders as well as engagement with various church activities and programs beyond worship services.

Now, my visualisation of the missional situation involved this stylised diagram here. The circle represents the total population with age going upwards.

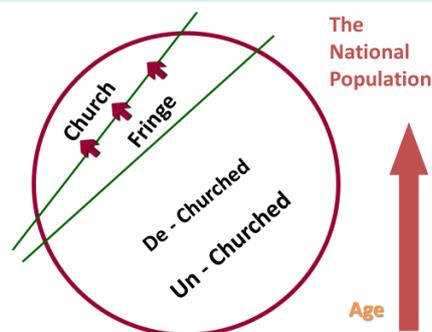
I have represented the active church towards the top on the very general recognition that average congregational age profiles have been rising and have long settled well above those of the national population. And I show this associated "fringe" alongside Church and of a similar small percentage proportion.



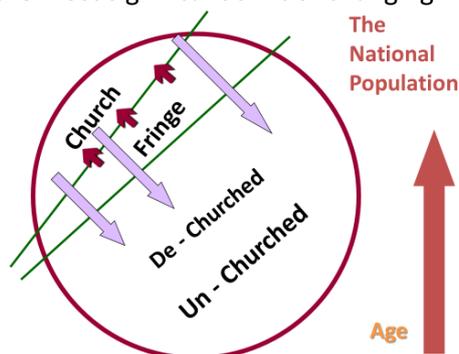
It was at a parish evangelism weekend back in the early 80's that a national home mission team challenged us with the vision and ideas to engage this fringe. The sum of their overall evangelistic challenge was that... first, the open and responsive relationships in this fringe made them easier to reach; then second, the mission field represented by this 'fringe', anyway represented more than enough for the resources that we had and anyway, would result in significant growthy if made active worshippers. Whatever the pragmatic truth of this counsel, I was decidedly uncomfortable that this seemed to consign the rest of the 80% of the population beyond our mission responsibility.

### More complex mission understandings challenging our responses

Around the same time and in other quarters, evangelistic and mission field watchers had recognised that beyond the church "fringe" of semi-connected folk were two other distinct groups. These were described as the de-churched and the unchurched, those who had never related to church. And certainly, all these were seen as our mission responsibility. Further lessons were being explored as to how we might engage them.



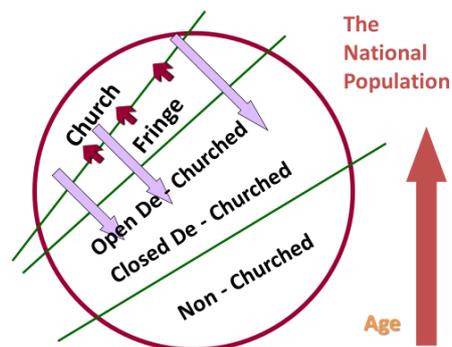
Further clarity only came some decade later in the mid-90's after we had been part of a fledgling church planting movement, with a couple of books and grove booklets written and a succession of National Anglican Church Planting Conferences held. By this stage, our observation and those of others, was to note that the previous decade and a half in church planting, had achieved the most significant shift of changing the mission direction! From attraction IN towards existing church, the missionary pioneer planting teams had mobilised "OUTWARD" into the mission field! This is illustrated by the second set of larger arrows in the figure...



This planting movement, together with wider research, had led to refining further the analysis of the field beyond the existing congregations. On the one hand, our church planting observer colleague George Lings suggested that un-churched

was a misleading description for those with no church history. He rightly noted that unchurched was not clear enough for the category having no past experience of church. He argued that the 'un-seated' MP's or 'un-seated' horsemen were those who had been seated! So he proposed 'non-churched' as a more accurate description for those farthest from the existing congregation who had never connected.

Further, more penetrating analysis and research recognised that those who had previous church experience actually fell into two distinct categories. The open de-churched and the closed de-churched. The former have no negative relation to church, they just lapsed attendance due to life changes. On the other hand, the closed de-churched had made a conscious decision to step out, often with negative perceptions or experiences. This distinction is really important as the open category may be among the easiest mission field and the closed de-churched probably the hardest.



### Another Dramatic Mission Shift

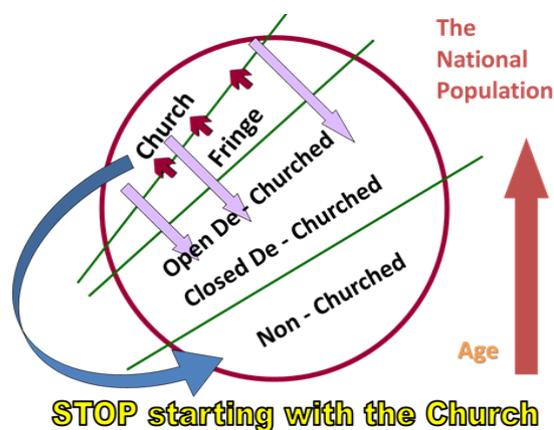
Now, towards the end of the 90's, as church planting patterns continued, further investigations revealed yet more significant developments and understandings.

First, as the earlier pioneers had gone on this planting adventure beyond the church, there was a recognition that whilst the direction had changed outwards, many had carried over with us, our 'mental map' of church. And this was tending to result in a replication of church 'as we had known it'.

Just as the arrows outward in my figure imply a carrying of inherited understandings of church, so numbers of planters assumed the task was to evangelise new contexts but gather those responding to substantially unchanged expressions of church. Some observers, even termed this "cloning"! In fact, this critique was included in the Mission-shaped Church Report. I personally, have always resisted this, since a clone has zero changed genetic material/identity. Whereas I argue, that even replicational plants had navigated a range of great identity changes. These included changing the mission direction from come to go; pioneers moving house and making career changes; and the release of lay mission teams, etc, etc.

However, a second category of adventurers/planters was also becoming evident. These pioneers had not only changed the direction of travel to "OUT", they had also crossed the next frontier on this mission journey. They had recognised the need to re-imagine church for the different and diverse contexts in our plural society.

I represent this in my stylised figure, by the arrow outside the circle. This expresses the fact that inherited and ingrained assumptions about church were open to re-negotiation, even to be left behind on the exploration of inculturation of the gospel and church. This is the truly incarnational journey.



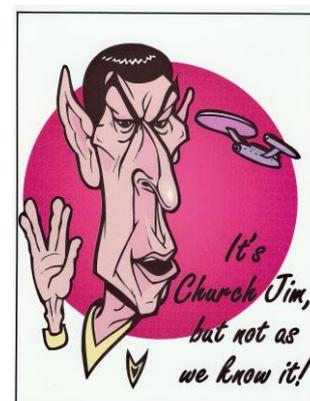
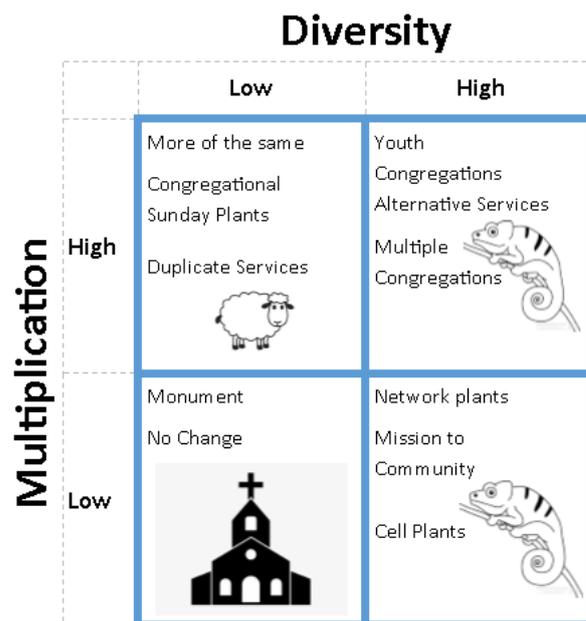
And it was this which led me to coin the phrase... "We must stop starting with Church!".

As we looked for another way to visualise these distinct journeys on the mission landscape, George Lings and I developed this next diagram which he shared at the 1997 National Anglican Church Planting Conference.

In our presentations, we had used the analogy of the chameleon. This creature does not change its intrinsic essence. But adapts and changes its exterior and appearance according to its surroundings. Some contexts prompting greater adaptations than others. So too, we were observing the same adaptive phenomenon with church planters. In the fertile field of missional entrepreneurship and improvisation, these pioneers were leading us on a journey not undertaken before in Europe for centuries.

At the same 1997 national conference, as we recognised the shift from planting more churches to planting different churches, we realised that the foundational question we were being pushed to explore was... "What is Church?" One of our team created posters for the event with the picture here – a parody on the topical Star Trek series at the time... "It's Church Jim, but not as we know it!"

Now, it is extremely important to recognise that all these journeys of discovery laid the foundations for the 2004 Mission-shaped Church Report. As its authors (George Lings the major drafter) acknowledged, they were merely reflecting and commenting on a church planting movement that God himself had initiated. Absolutely not, a 'top-down' clever strategic response of the church institutional. And a response that started with multiplication of church and continued with modification and 'morphing' of church.



### Postscript - Some crossovers with the DAWN movement (1970's to 1990's!)

We and Martin Robinson (another member of the original Challenge 2000 team) have written up a summary of the remarkable worldwide DAWN (Discipling A Whole Nation) movement in another paper. But here it is perhaps relevant to point out a number of links with these broad insights of the need to ... "Stop starting with Church", ask "what is Church?" and become "Mission-shaped Church".

One of the key insights of the DAWN movement which launched in 1974 in the Philippines, was the recognition of the need to shift focus from the existing church or even its immediate fringe, and rather to make the primary focus the whole of the unreached challenge. Then a second key insight in assessing the response to the whole unreached mission field, was the need to start with what it would look like to complete the Great Commission (Matt 28 v 18-20). This in stark contrast to most church thinking and planning that starts with the next small step from where we currently are. Both those insights unpack and give detail to what it is to "Stop starting with church".

However, the DAWN insights as developed in the UK in fact provide a cautionary tale... illustrating that these excellent mission principles floundered and failed in England precisely since we did not appreciate these two foundational insights and the other principles that flowed from them.

In summary, we failed to recognise soon enough this “stop starting with church” foundation. I was in fact part of the national steering team that sought to bring the DAWN insights and process to England under the banner of Challenge 2000. We held the first Challenge 2000 Congress in Birmingham in 1992 with some 600 leaders across all denominations. The key DAWN insights above, together with other principles learned from the Philippines, were shared. They were presented as a ‘prophetic message’ which included well researched findings of the national mission field in turn related to existing churches, which provided the scope of the scale of the challenge to complete the task (Matt 28 v 18-20)

All the denominations participated and each denominational team set goals in the light of the unfinished task. These goals were revisited in a second Challenge 2000 Congress three years later in Nottingham in 1995. However, two critical failures led to its swift and dramatic collapse and discrediting.

First, and crucially, we got the time frame spectacularly wrong! Perhaps influenced by the title of the popular book promoting the DAWN vision... “DAWN 2000” (published 1989). Maybe re-enforced by the history of the successful originating DAWN movement in Philippines that set goals for the year 2000, we naïvely went for the same end point! Others suggested we were encouraged by ‘pre-millennial tension’ and the ‘hype’ leading up to it! Whatever the factors, we failed to observe the third key element of the original DAWN process in the Philippines. Yes, having recognised that planning should be shaped by the end goal in mind, they then assessed what it would look like to complete the great commission. And Yes, this led to a goal expressed in numbers of new churches required. However, we overlooked the key fact that, building on their research and inter-church co-operative platform, they set their goal for the year 2000. Yes, shaped by the perspective of ‘completion’ – but set in 1974!

This was a 26-year time frame! Their wisdom was to own the whole task of completing Jesus’ commission – but only within the entirety of their generation. We now see that this was divine wisdom. Firstly, a generational time frame for such a major undertaking is the only strategic sense. Secondly, theologically, God only tasks each generation with co-operating with Him on such a whole life Kingdom undertaking. In hindsight, how crazy was it for us to set such goals in 1992 for 2000 – just an 8-year time frame!

Then, as we have already argued, the second crucial mistake relates directly to the subject of this paper. “Stop starting with Church!” We failed to address the question of “what is Church?”. We needed to be open to realise that we had inherited a model of church with two millennia of successive accumulations and assumptions... Which with its ever-increasing complexity, might be fine for a static Christendom culture and context, has become significantly dysfunctional for delivering on a current mission imperative.

In 1991 through to 1995 we were only just waking up to the realisation that it was not so much ‘more churches’ needed as ‘different churches’. Again, DAWN Philippines had ‘divine wisdom’ here. They started with the mission field and the adoption of a mission focus as their smallest socio-economic unit, the ‘Barangay’. A ‘barrio’ with a population of 500-1500 people. And their shared aim was for the planting of any communal expression of the life of Jesus in each of these Buranguays. Their planning and goals did not start with Church. They started with the mission field. And then they continued, not with church as they knew it, but with a re-imagining of the shared life of Jesus incarnate in every sub-unit of society. Their correct missiological instincts were that completion of the Great Commission would mean, not just everyone hearing the gospel of Jesus, but everyone being able to see and connect with the Gospel being lived out in their midst... in their language and culture... in ‘touching distance’. ‘The local church as the hermeneutic of the gospel’... in true Newbigin understanding!

In conclusion, the DAWN principles so well identified and worked through in 1974 onwards in the Philippines, was based on all of the following seven core principles, listed here:

1. The whole church to be mobilised for the whole nation in wholistic mission
2. United prayer as the first foundational activity, focussed on God and his mission
3. Good research of the unfinished task, explored geographically and socio-ethnically
4. A right planning approach, starting from the end goal of completing the Commission
5. Recognition of the basic Kingdom outcome – incarnation of church in every sub-unit of society
6. Faced the implication of the above.. the need to re-imagine church ... asking Q “what is Church?”
7. All the denominational partners working towards a ‘generational timeframe’.

The irony of our Challenge 2000 application of these DAWN principles, was that I think that from 1990 to 1995, we were progressing reasonably well on all the first five principles, one through five. But it was on principles six and seven that we floundered and fell. Goals are not inappropriate in good planning. But the timeframe must be realistic. And the basic unit of counting must be achievable and appropriate to completing the task. Our understanding of church was still shaped by the inherited model. It was building-centred and Sunday-centred and priest-centred. Heavy weight and high maintenance... extremely limited in its multiplication capacity, where light weight and low maintenance are the watchwords.

We had not listened to the prophetic insights of leaders like Robert Warren, who in his simple and challenging books, published in the same year as the second DAWN/Challenge 2000 Congress, had set it all out (Being Human, Being Church & Building Missionary Congregations – both 1995). One summary he gave encapsulated the change needed as follows:

We need to move From:            Inherited Church = Building + Priest + Stipend

To:                                    Missional Church = People + Faith + Action

Oh! Woe is me... we in Challenge 2000... were truly “undone”! However, God never gives up. Though our attempt died and was discredited... the gospel principles have been rebirthed. First, in ‘The Mission-shaped Church’ Report less than a decade later. Then in all sorts of movements which followed helping us re-imagine more contextual and lighter weight expressions of Church with greater possibilities of delivering multiplication. The cell church movement, ‘emerging church’ movement; fresh expressions movement; organic church/Bible Discovery Group and Disciple making movements have all focussed on the priority of starting with mission and re-imagining church on the journey.

Bob Hopkins, 2019