

Alternative Worship and Mission for Change

(Interview with Bishop Graham Cray with Brian Draper in Church Times 7th May 2004)

Brian Draper: How well is *Mission-Shaped Church* going down?

Graham Cray: I'm impressed by how well it's been received so far. It looks like there is a real possibility for change - rather than this being a report about a good idea, which grows dust on the shelf.

Is there an appetite for change among churches themselves?

There is and there isn't. We are not saying that traditional church should stop. The whole point of a "mixed economy" is that we can add more focused initiatives to the underlying network of parochial church. Cathedrals and other places of tradition are also growing. People like that sort of thing, so they go. But we need the Church to give permission for additional projects to happen as well, and to release enough resources to make them happen. Our report is not recommending what the Church of England ought to do, but telling it what it's already doing, and how important it is.

Our community, l8r, emerged from Holy Trinity in Northwood, but we now see ourselves existing interdependently. It's the first time some of us have been made really welcome in a mainstream church. Is this happening elsewhere?

Some alternative-worship communities have always had a home: Grace at St Mary's in Ealing, for example and Visions at St Michael's in York. Part of the story is that there's always been a home. And people are also realising alternative worship is OK. To me you have proved it; and the memory of what went so badly wrong with the Nine O'clock Service in Sheffield is fading, as it now should.

We've sensed that the time of deconstruction is coming to an end, and a time of reconstruction is beginning. But there's still a tension between the enthusiasm of generating a radical alternative to church, and fear of creating another institution.

There are two issues in the report that lessen that danger. One is the growing recognition that the whole Church is on the edge in "post-Christendom", and we have to get used to it. So the idea of power of the institution, and its right to say what everything should look like, is fading. The most critical thing in the report is a the whole business of "inculturation"; of allowing the shape of church to emerge from "below", as the people planting or doing it engage with those they encounter in mission. Here the highest costs come in terms of your own comfort, of how you like church. That is the price you pay; you know what you're risking. That's a challenge as much to the people who think they know what an alternative-

worship community should look like, as to those who know what a church should look like because it's the local parish. It's about sacrificial creativity. A church that comes into being from a passion to see people who aren't like "us" encounter Christ and become, with him, part of the community, cuts this nerve of consumer self-interest and individualism. So this is a vital seed we're planting into the Church of England as a whole.

And into alternative worship, which might sometimes be in danger of not going in search of - or at least welcoming - the kind of people who don't fit in with our own preferences.

I think that's right. If alternative worshippers become "missionary", it'll be to people who have not been on quite the same journey. This is one of their most profound challenges. A lot of these communities are looking dynamically at tradition, at their lives, and seeking to be church. Given that no one form of the Church will reach the whole of a diverse society, there's plenty of room on the field.

Discipleship is surely one of the most important issues facing the Church.

I'm not convinced that we have the same frameworks and patterns to help people know what it means to be a disciple of Christ within consumer culture. David Lyon, in *Jesus in Disneyland*, argues that most of the churches simply have not come to terms with consumerism at all. I'm concerned that we don't have "transferable strategies" within the Church for discipling people. It sounds a bit like McDonald's, but we need something that has proved itself, through which you can mentor others, otherwise, every little group is reinventing the wheel.

And that's different from creating a blue-print that others will follow just because it's successful?

Yes. At its heart is a combination of mentoring (one-to-one relationships, which are about character); mutually accountable groups (which are about friendship and life-choice and prayer); and belonging to something bigger. We need a gentle rule of life that has those dimensions but which avoids control, manipulation and hierarchy.

Did alternative worship have a unique prophetic edge? And does it have a future, now that people in the Church are catching up with social and cultural trends, and new forms of church are emerging?

Some very creative people, who were more aware of social, cultural and philosophical trends, were genuinely prophetic in that they caught the tide that was coming in. They responded in all sorts of different ways, and proved to be prophetic by creating forms of Church that have been sustained; and being the first on the block to say, "We need something new". They've proved to be prophetic by their engagement with the combination of electronic technology and ancient

tradition. And that makes them a very interesting bridge between reinvigorated traditional church (like cathedrals) and some of the places that have far less tradition.

Would the Church have been much different today had NOS not imploded so spectacularly?

I remember standing with Robert Warren in the crypt of Lambeth Palace, in the September after it had all blown up. We had a day conference. Archbishop George Carey had pledged to let alternative worship continue, making it quite clear that he knew the difference between good vision and abuse of leadership. Paul Roberts and others put together a Eucharist in the crypt, and I remember Robert turned to me and said, "None of this would have been possible without NOS." There were groups from all round the country in the room. So we have this bizarre history, that something good went so bad.

Do you feel optimistic about the report and the Church?

Believing in God is a good starting-point. What I see from the report is God doing all sorts of fascinating things, in and through the Church of England as well as other Churches. Archbishop Rowan Williams is increasingly talking about mission as "seeing what God is doing, and joining in". We have areas of the Church where it's withering on the vine - ageing congregations trying to maintain huge, historic buildings. But I also see this extraordinary mix of imagination and initiative, and network, and that gives me hope. We're going to end up with a very different-looking Church, but one that is seriously engaged in mission in 21st-century Britain. And I look forward to it.