

Reaching the Emerging Generation

'A recent survey of the Anglican Communion has shown that the average Anglican is aged between twenty and thirty, is brown-skinned, poor, lives in the Two-thirds world, and is evangelical.' So wrote Chris Sugden five years ago. The contrast with the Church of England could not be more stark. As far as average age is concerned, those between twenty and thirty are the least represented group in the English church. In the last two decades of the twentieth century the numbers of people attending church while in their twenties dropped by 45%. This decline is accelerating. The 1990s saw a loss in this age group of half as many again as that of the 80s. The Church of England suffered the largest part of this decline in the 90s.

But work with young adults is vital. I am chairman of the Soul Survivor Trust and therefore have a major commitment to ministry among teenagers. But all those who work with adolescents know that they are going through a major time of identity formation. They are exploring Christian faith while, at the same time, discovering who they are. Young adults are beyond adolescence but have often not yet made irrevocable life commitments. Our ministry with them is vital as it can result in life long Christian vocation.

Culture change

The Church's struggle to hold on to younger people should not surprise us. The last few decades have seen a cultural shift of substantial proportions. According to a recent book by Callum Brown, the 1960's saw a social revolution which brought about 'The death of a culture which formerly conferred Christian identity upon the British people as a whole.' In other words Christendom - where Christian belief provided the context for public debate and the Church was seen as central to society, even by those who don't go - ceased to function. It did not disappear as a way of viewing the world. It just became a minority opinion. The children who grew up in the sixties and seventies (often known as the Baby Boomers) may have rebelled against Christian morality, and experimented with drugs and Eastern religion, but they did know the Christian story from school and Sunday school. Many of their children, (often known as Generations X and Y) do not. They are not shaped by it and they see no reason to take it seriously.

The closing decades of the twentieth century were also the decades of the new electronic media. Tex Sample has written 'It is no secret that those most influenced by electronic culture participate in church at far lower levels than those of previous generations.

I believe that the failure of the church, as of yet, to deal with the changes brought on by an electronic culture is a basic factor in the lower levels of participation of post-World War 2 electronic generations.' For example up to 500,000 young people a week go clubbing (more than those who attend spectator sports, cinema, theatre, live music and comedy combined).The watershed age group for clubbing is the mid-twenties. Although more and more thirty year olds and over now attend. To those raised in the rock era, or whose musical boundaries do not extend beyond Classic FM, this is an unknown world.

The massive cultural changes of the last twenty years have resulted in a radically different way of seeing and interpreting the world. These social forces change the way we experience time and space. 'At a profound social level, time and space, the

very matrix of human social life, are undergoing radical social restructuring.' We communicate electronically across the world 'in no time.' We live in a society which expects everything to be 'instant.' Distance is no longer an obstacle. So the neighbourhood is no longer a commitment. Mobility is a norm. The power of places to provide identity is being 'replaced' by the power of flows of information, capital and power in a networked society. Whether or not 'postmodern' is the best title for this cultural era, what is clear is that it is both different to what has gone before and 'normal' to young people and young adults. It requires a renewal of imagination about the form of mission and therefore the form of the church. Rather than be surprised at the lack of young adults in the church, we should be grateful that we have any at all. We are in a new missionary situation and a significant proportion of young adults cannot be reached by the Christendom based strategies with which the Church of England is accustomed. As Andrew Walls has written 'It is now too late to treat Western society as in some sort of decline from Christian standards, to be brought back to the church by preaching and persuasion. Modern Western society, taken as a whole, reflects one of the great non-Christian cultures of the world.' We have no choice about being missionaries.

Gospel priority

The Church of England is not called to reach this emerging generation because of falling numbers, or because it needs to do so to survive. The Church of England is called to reach them because the gospel requires it. The licensing of any reader or priest includes the reading of the preface to the Declaration of Assent. Every licensed minister agrees that the Gospel must be proclaimed afresh 'in each generation'. But in a time of cultural change 'to proclaim afresh' has ecclesiological implications. When culture changes the church cannot remain the same. In particular the geographically based parochial system needs to be supplemented by a network approach. In a paper for the House of Bishops Michael Nazi Ali has written that 'the shapes of the church in the future will be both territorial and networked.'

The Church of England is a national church. It has a commitment to reach all types of people in all places, not just where it is easier, or in the ways that it is used to. As Robin Greenwood has written 'The agenda of the local church must always be to include rather than exclude. Unconsciously churches reject large tracts of humanity by failing to make provision for them to find a 'space' which they can occupy without automatically denying their culture, music, way of speech, or capacity to handle texts and concepts.' For young adults to find a space we will need new approaches to church and patterns of discipleship. There is then a tension today between our church structures and our missionary responsibility. But our core identity is missionary, or we have no claim to be a national church!

First steps

But first steps to establish ministry focused on young adults are already being taken in the Church of England. Christian Research have done helpful work on the characteristics of Generations X and Y. St. Thomas Crookes in Sheffield is one of the largest Anglican churches in the north of England, with up to 2000 attending on a Sunday. 80% of the congregation is under 40, most in their twenties and thirties. Tribal Training, a year's discipleship course pioneered at St Thomas's is now being offered by parishes in London, Canterbury, Cheltenham and Dublin. The Tribal Generation website offers imaginative resources, links and support. At the summer New Wine events an 'emerging generation' seminar track began last summer and will

be developed further this year. Our target audience at the Soul Survivor Summer festivals is 13 to 25. A series of seminars for 20s was introduced last year, alongside a series of seminars for young leaders.

Future articles in this series will spell out the main principles for working with this generation and their culture. But work must begin with an understanding of their world and the way they see it. In a post-Christendom context mission is 'go to' not 'come to'. New ministries established will have to be hospitable to their culture and concerns. As Robin Greenwood wrote, it has to provide a 'space' for them. They will often need to belong before they will either believe, or be open to whatever changes in behaviour the gospel may require of them.

It is often said that children in the church are part of the church of today not the church of tomorrow. Of course, this also applies to those in their twenties. But at a time of profound cultural change we either plant the gospel and the church into this emerging generation; the first adult generation of a new cultural era. Or in a few decades time the gospel will be alien to most age groups in our nation. The gospel must be 'proclaimed afresh' in this generation, for the sake of many future generations. What seems like an experiment for a minority of Anglicans may well shape the whole Church of England for years to come.

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