

# **The Mission of the Triune God Shaping Congregations Today Working towards a Mission-shaped Church**

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Thank you for your welcome. It is very good to spend these three days with you in Norway and to have the privilege of addressing your General Synod. I hope it will be helpful to have an external perspective on your conversation and planning together.

I bring you warm greetings from the Church of England and from the Diocese of Sheffield in particular. This is my second visit to your beautiful country. I greatly enjoyed my visit last year to Bergen and to the conference of the Norwegian Missionary Society.

My own background in Christian ministry is that I have spent 13 years in two different parishes: one in the south of England and one in the north. I then spent 8 years leading a theological college for Anglican and Methodist Ministers and almost five years as Archbishops' Missioner and Team Leader of Fresh Expressions. In that capacity I travelled widely across England and beyond listening to what is happening as people encourage fresh expressions of church. I will explain that term in a moment. Six months ago I began a new ministry as Bishop of Sheffield in the north of England. In that capacity I still have my L plates on.

My purpose this morning is to describe to you something of what is happening across England as we engage in God's mission and how we are being reshaped by that engagement. Clearly there are some similarities between our two contexts and some differences. Not everything we are doing will be helpful or relevant to your situation. There will be much that we can learn from you.

The most important thing I have to share with you is the story of the way in which the Church of England is attempting to respond to what we believe is the call of God by developing new forms of church for our changing culture. We are no longer marginalising such initiatives. We are not holding them at arms length. We are not resisting their growth and development. We are seeking to resource and encourage these ventures as an integral part of our common life.

My presentation seeks to answer 4 simple questions: What is happening? Why is it happening? How is it happening? Where will it all lead?

## **What is happening?**

Our society is changing rapidly. Part of that change means there are fundamental changes taking place in the ways in which people engage with and express their faith.

Put very simply, the gap between where much of the church is and where much of our society is grows wider and wider.

As this gap grows wider, the number of people able to make the journey from the society around into the life of the church grows less. In consequence the numbers of people taking

part in Sunday worship and other church activities grows smaller and our congregations grow older.

In response to this development, over a number of years, individuals and groups have discerned a call, a vocation, to go to the surrounding culture sent by God in mission. They have gone not to draw people back to the existing church or to recreate church as they have known it but to form new communities of Christians in different ways appropriate to their context.

Some of these experiments have been provisional and temporary; others have been very fruitful.

They include many new congregations at parish level: youth congregations; midweek gatherings for families and young children; Saturday evening congregations; groups meeting in schools or residential homes. They also include now many congregations established by dioceses for unreached areas or people groups – most often network churches for young adults meeting across towns and cities.

These experiments in mission were initially very scattered and spontaneous: the result of many different people responding to a changing context. We did not have the language to describe what was taking place.

In 2002 the Church of England set up a working party chaired by Bishop Graham Cray to examine this range of experiments. In 2004 this working party reported to the General Synod and called its report Mission-Shaped Church. The report has now sold over 13,000 copies and has been reprinted many times over. It is the best selling General Synod Report of all time.

Mission-shaped Church does several things in respect of this new movement which are very important.

First the report tries to develop language to describe what is happening and coins two terms which have proved vital. The first is the term “fresh expressions of church” to describe this diverse range of new congregations formed through contextual mission.

As part of the follow up work to the report we defined the term in a more precise way as follows:

A fresh expression is a form of church for our changing culture established primarily for the benefit of people who are not yet members of any church.

It will come into being through principles of listening, service, incarnational mission and making disciples.

It will have the potential to become a mature expression of church shaped by the gospel and the enduring marks of the church and for its cultural context.

The second piece of language coined by Archbishop Rowan Williams and referred to in the report was the term the mixed economy church.

There is much about our present way of being church which is good and wholesome and valuable. We are not seeking to jettison this. We want to affirm and grow all that is good.

However our society is changing in such a way that we can no longer reach the whole of society through one single form of church. We need to be one church but in a variety of expressions of church. That will mean growing a mixed economy of existing congregations and fresh expressions of church.

Once it has developed this language, Mission-shaped Church also provided the vehicle for the Church of England to say at national level and at Diocesan level: These developments are very good indeed and of God and vital for our work together in God's mission. We will no longer regard this kind of activity as marginal or on the edge of our life but we will nurture and encourage and resource these initiatives whole-heartedly and across our different traditions. We will apply our best minds to thinking through the ecclesiology and missiology. We will develop strategies and resources to help us to learn how to do this kind of mission really well. We will be intentional and strategic about the mixed economy church.

That decision has had far reaching consequences for the Church of England in the five years since the publication of Mission shaped Church. We have seen an encouragement and flourishing of a range of different local initiatives. According to one survey these are now taking place in some ways in at least half of Anglican parishes. Some of these claims are aspirational but undeniably the language and the movement is now widespread and affects every single diocese. In most dioceses now more work is being done with children and young people through midweek activities and fresh expressions of church than is taking place through traditional congregations on Sunday mornings. Church planting and training for these ministries is becoming a normal part of Anglican church life. We have much still to learn but the face of the Church of England is being changed.

### **Why is this happening?**

What are the theological roots of this change?

Undoubtedly our changing context has led us to examine again our theological roots and our tradition.

As you would expect there are different streams feeding this movement but the predominant stream is a re-examination and rediscovery of the mission of God – *missio dei* – at the heart of our faith.

The God of the Scriptures first and foremost a God of mission: of sending. This love, this pouring out of God into his world is at the heart of the Trinity. It is God's overflowing grace in mission which lies at the heart of creation.

There has been a new exploration of the doctrine of the Trinity in recent years rooted in the work of the Cappadocian Fathers and expounded in the work of the orthodox theologian John Zizioulas.

This stream of thinking is often represented in a convenient and beautiful shorthand by Rublev's icon portraying the visitation to Abraham at the oaks of Mamre. Father, Son and

Holy Spirit sit in peaceful contemplation and in mutual love. We are invited to take our place at the table – to become part of the fellowship of the Holy Trinity.

This perspective on the Trinity is a vital one. It enables us to see much more clearly the call of the church to be itself a community of fellowship made up of different elements rather than a hierarchy of bishops, priests and people.

However no single picture can of course reflect the nature or the mission of the Triune God. In its own work the Church of England has been very open to the influence of Zizioulas and others yet has also listened deeply to the theologians in the world church who have offered the complementary perspective as the Trinity as deeply concerned and active in mission.

In this complementary picture of God the Father sends the Son; the Father and the Son together send the Spirit; the Father, Son and Spirit together send the church. According to John 20.21: “As the Father has sent me so I send you”.

The call to be caught up in the life of the Trinity is seen from this perspective a call to be caught up in this great mission, this story of salvation history, this sending and re-sending from the heart of God. It is a call to be caught up in the mission Dei: the sending at the heart of the Trinitarian God.

This is a perspective on the Trinity expressed in the great theologians of world mission and particularly in the writings of the South African theologian David Bosch. The church on earth is by its very nature missionary. It is a perspective brought to the Church of England in particular through two main influences.

The first has been the role of the Anglican Communion. The Church of England is as you know is part of a great and world wide communion. This theology of the mission of God has informed a series of Lambeth Conferences and their resolutions and in particular the progressive framing of the five marks of mission of the Anglican Communion in 1978 and 1988 and the Church of England’s participation in the Decade of Evangelism in the 1990’s. All of this has helped us to move in a direction shaped by the mission of God. The five marks of mission are:

- To proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom
- To teach, baptise and nurture new believers
- To respond to human need by loving service
- To seek to transform unjust structures of society
- To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth

These five marks have provided an agreed missiology which all of the Church of England can own. The language of the mission of God has formed and shaped theological education from the late 1980’s in such a way that it now makes a difference both to the selection criteria which explicitly mention mission and evangelism and to the curriculum and patterns of assessment.

The second great influence apart from the Anglican Communion have been a stream of missionary theologians who have spent their lives and ministries in what is explicitly a mission situation and have then returned to reflect on their experiences in Britain or

elsewhere in the traditionally Christian West. Their reflections have helped the church to realise in deeper ways that we are once again caught up in a mission context and therefore need to reflect upon our common life. Some of these names will be familiar to you: Roland Allen was a missionary to China and wrote several key reflections at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century which were way ahead of their time. Vincent Donovan was a Roman Catholic missionary to the Masai peoples. His book, “Christianity Rediscovered” has had a profound influence on the movement to establish fresh expressions of church. John Taylor was a CMS missionary to Africa and former head of the Church Missionary Society. His books, particularly the *Go Between God* are a clear articulation of a theology for mission which have influenced a generation of theologians, bishops and practitioners in the United Kingdom. It is John Taylor who first articulated the wonderful phrase which is now widely quoted in Anglican documents on mission:

“Mission is about finding out what God is doing and joining in”.

One of the key elements in the cluster of ideas around *missio Dei* is that the Trinity is already at work in the world outside the church. God continues to reach out, to call, to love those he has created. We therefore go, as the Apostles went to Philippi so long ago, confident that we will find those who are seeking.

I hope I have said enough in this section to convince you that the movement to develop fresh expressions of church by the Church of England has deep roots both in the recovery of a sense of the *missio Dei* in world theology; in biblical studies and in our recent practice and exploration. It is the logical and practical outworking of shifts in our theological perspective which go back now a generation. It is not the mindless pursuit of the trendy or of consumer Christianity.

### **How is it happening?**

We have looked at what is happening in the Church of England and at why though in a very introductory way.

We now turn to the question of how all of this is taking place and I will explore this in two sections. The first is to take a closer look at the methodology which has developed out of this theology of mission for the practice of fresh expressions of church. The second is to look at how as a church we are encouraging and resourcing this movement.

How is a fresh expression of church formed and shaped? The basic movement is one of going to where people are – of mission – and of allowing church to take shape there.

One helpful and topographical way of describing the changes in our culture is this one. The previous shaping of our society in Christendom was that everything was shaped to draw people to the doors of the Christian church in the rhythm of their lives and the rhythm of the week and of the year. The legal protection of Sundays and Christian festivals; rites of passage; the role of the church in education and the health service and so on. Evangelism is essentially attractational. We become skilled at drawing the people who come to the doors of the church to the font and to the altar: to baptism and the eucharist and sharing the life of the church.

But what happens to those patterns if the whole shape of our society changes. We are in transition here. For some people the shaping of society does still have the effect of drawing them into contact with the churches, particularly the older generation.

But for the majority this no longer applies. The very culture they are part of and the very shaping of society draws them not towards the church but further away.

What is the church to do in such a context? We could simply stand as it were at the top of the hill and shout louder and louder to this group of people but this is unlikely to be effective. Or we could simply decide that our ministry is to this group of people who are still brought to our doors. There are two problems with this approach. The first is that this group of people are on any reckoning a diminishing proportion of the population. We estimate about 30-40% now and growing older. The second is that it is impossible as a church to focus our mission on one part of the population only and also read the New Testament and be faithful to what it says. The theology of the God of mission calls us to attempt to connect with the whole population once again.

But that means learning not only a new direction but new skills which are not traditionally part of the mindset of clergy and congregations. We have to go where people are not to draw them back up the hill but to form new congregations and communities there: fresh expressions of church. If we are sent as Jesus is sent we need to learn again the principles of incarnational mission. This is what we believe they look like.

Every fresh expression of church begins with a group of people being sent from an existing community whether parish or diocese. So there is prayer and there is connection to the wider body of Christ. But the main pathway for developing the new community is that of listening both to the context and to the call of God in that place. The listening is not just the starting point but the pathway of development.

Once that habit of listening is established then the sequence looks something like this. Most fresh expressions of church begin by finding ways to serve a particular network or group of people. Through the service relationships grow and a community begins to form. In the midst of this community there are opportunities for evangelism and discipleship. As people come to faith so there a church begins to grown. That church must then itself go on a journey of discovery about how to express its worship, its fellowship, its mission and its sense of belonging. It must discover how to develop a sacramental life and how to be rooted in God's word.

But this is the main shape to the way in which these communities are developing among families; among the very poor; among young adults and so on. The fresh expressions of church take their place alongside the existing churches as part of this tapestry, this mixed economy or mixed ecology of church life.

Second, how are we as a church encouraging this movement as an intentional part of who we are seeking to become as a missionary church?

Let me give you six ways:

### *Policy and leadership*

First, we are declaring in various ways that it is our policy to form fresh expressions of church alongside traditional churches at national level and diocesan level. This is what the Mission-shaped Church report was about. The support and leadership of our Archbishops has been key. I have found in this respect that the leadership offered by bishops and their staffs makes a huge difference to whether ordinary Anglican churches are willing to explore these options.

### *Clear and consistent vision*

Second, we are attempting to communicate a clear, consistent vision for fresh expressions of church across the country through the telling of stories; through simple language and literature which every church can access; through the provision of vision days which draw about a hundred people together in a town to explore these concepts. These and other endeavours to encourage fresh expressions of church are best done ecumenically.

### *Identifying pioneer ministers*

Third, we are doing our best to identify and release the people with the gifts and skills to engage in forming this kind of community. We need our missionaries to lead this work which requires a different set of gifts from traditional parish ministry. We have created frameworks and guidelines for what the Church of England has called pioneer ministry: forming fresh expressions of church. We have guidelines for ordained pioneers and 70 ordinands now trained or in training to focus here. Through these guidelines we have drawn in a new stream of younger, outward facing clergy to the life of the church. We have guidelines for lay, self supporting pioneers. We believe it is essential for every diocese to have a small number of full time pioneers to give this work profile and to gather expertise. The majority of fresh expressions though are led by teams of lay people.

### *Providing training for lay and ordained*

Fourth, we are doing our best to provide training for these ministries which is contextually based, part time and takes place alongside the exercise of ministry. A key part of our strategy has been to develop a one year part time course for teams of clergy and lay people called Mission Shaped Ministry. MSM takes place over one residential weekend, three Saturdays and eight evenings over a year. People ideally come in teams. They learn together about mission and ecclesiology; about evangelism and discipleship; about leadership and ministry; about forming fresh expressions of church and growing them to maturity.

MSM is now up and running in every part of England and in Scotland, Wales, Ireland and Canada. We have invested a great deal in the development of enabling learning materials which can be delivered in many different places. The teams are open to exploring exporting the course to other parts of the world. Over 1200 students have completed the course or are on it at the moment. We want to train thousands of lay and ordained pioneers.

### *Bishops' Mission Orders – recognizing congregations*

Fifthly we are doing our best to adapt our structures, policies and processes to enable fresh expressions of church to take their place within and alongside parishes. We have developed a

complex piece of legal gearing called the Bishops Mission Order which enables a bishop to give legal recognition to a fresh expression.

And finally we are continuing to reflect theologically upon what all of this means for our ecclesiology, for our liturgy, for patterns of ministry and for our common life.

### **Where is this all leading?**

Finally and briefly where of all this thinking and development leading the Church of England as we seek to form these new communities through contextual mission?

I believe we are striving to become more and more a church which is once again for the whole nation; I believe we are becoming a more hopeful church as we have a sense of direction and a way to navigate complex and changing times; I believe we are becoming a church which is more confident in the gospel we proclaim as we see the difference Christ is making to so many lives; I believe we are becoming a more fruitful church as we see new congregations growing month by month and new people engaging in mission and ministry. The fruits of this renewal are seen in existing congregation as well as in the fresh expressions of church.

We have a long way to go. We have deliberately, I think, suspended judgement on what kind of Church of England we will be in 25 years time. Being faithful to the God of mission in times of great change means, I think, that we cannot always see too far into the distance. But I and many others are finding that our church is ready to be changed in this direction; that we seem to be running to keep up with what the God of mission is doing and that we are becoming in ways we never dreamed a church in mission once again.