

Future Church – changing patterns of mission Ross Langmead

The future isn't what it used to be. A hundred years ago the church faced the turn of the century with great optimism. Today as we again approach the turn of the century, the future is quite uncertain. Technology has not saved us. War and starvation are still with us. Rapid change is the order of the day. We Westerners enjoy the highest standard of living in history, but we are not happy. We're fragmented, thirsting for more, individualistic and searching for meaning. We are oppressed by fractured relationships, busyness, unemployment, a growing gap between the rich and the poor, an environmental crisis, and a whole range of new diseases of affluence and stress.

What will the church of the future have to say to this world? Will we continue to spend 90 per cent of our time and money on ourselves? Will we be conservative, negative and timid? Or will we experience the Good News of Jesus as a dangerous world-shattering power for transformation?

The theme of mission is closely interwoven with others we are discussing. The future church needs a style of leadership, modelled on Jesus, which empowers us for mission to the world and care for each other. What about mission?

Let me just take three changes in the way the future church will see mission, changes that amount to a revolution when you put them alongside the mission of many local Baptist churches today.

1. A new concept of mission

- **More than missions**

Mission used to mean 'missions', that is, full-time work overseas or amongst tribal people. Now it is more

than that. Mission is the whole task, local and overseas. It's the job of the whole church in the whole world, down the street or around the world. The old view of 'sending countries' (usually from the first world) and 'receiving countries' (usually from the third-world) is now replaced with mission from six continents to six continents. Global mission is still central, but it reaches home as well as overseas, and all Christians are now missionaries.

- **More than evangelism**

Mission also used to mean evangelism. Now it is more than that. Mission is the whole task, one task, including both the Great Commission, to go to all the world proclaiming the gospel, and the Great Commandment, to love God and our neighbors as ourselves. Mission includes both evangelism and social action, both preaching and being prophetic in society. Mission is to co-operate with God's purposes by pointing to the Kingdom of God, which is life under the gracious rule of God, in which people, societies and ultimately the cosmos are transformed. This is a big gospel, and our mission must be broad and try to point to the many dimensions of the Good News.

As an example, George McLeod, modern founder of the Iona Community, once asked Billy Graham why he didn't speak out against war and for peace. Billy said, 'I don't speak on social issues. I'm an evangelist. I work to convert people so that when they are Christians they will speak for peace and justice.' George said, 'Well, you and I are converted, so when are we going to start speaking?' From that time on Billy Graham spoke for peace in many forums.

- **More than an occasional mission**

Mission also used to mean 'a mission', a series of meetings in your local church. The future church will see mission as a seven-day-a-week affair, a dimension of all areas of life. Mission amounts to the sharing of

abundant life by ordinary people with ordinary people. Mission involves laughter, fun, trust, sharing pain together, exploring, not always knowing the answers, being honest. Local mission is a dimension of local church life, sometimes intentional but sometimes as natural as being who we are.

2. The whole church is in a missionary situation

A hundred years ago Christendom still existed, at least in many people's minds. Christendom is the mindset that we are a Christian country and that people will basically accept our values and understand what we are on about. But today, in Australia and in most parts of the so-called 'Christian' world, Christendom has crumbled, if it ever existed.

Like the early church we are in a raw missionary situation, taking the Good News to a society that ignores it, hasn't really heard it before, and has 100 other gospels competing for a share of the market. In a post-modern society many people see absolute truth as a nonsense, show little interest in big worldviews such as Christianity, and have little time for authorities and institutions. On the positive side, in post-modern society relationships are central, people listen to stories, minority views are given space, and people search for community. The world is not closed to the Gospel, but open in new ways.

The future church will train every member to survive in a world which is ignorant of the Good News and lives according to another culture. The cross-cultural training we offer to overseas missionaries is now necessary for all of us. Most mission is now cross-cultural. What language will we speak? What are the customs of these people? (Of course, there is still a big difference between mission here, where 'they' are the minority, and mission overseas, where we are the minority. Global mission will always need its specific focus.)

We will need to learn from the early church. A missionary church needs every member to be active. A missionary church travels light, is flexible and copes with disaster, opposition and rapid change. A missionary church relies not on programs, hierarchies and huge capital projects, but on the lives of the people, burning with a message that is too hot to keep to ourselves. Withdrawing from society is the last thing a future church will do; rather it will engage with all the hard issues and wrestle with what the Gospel means in all areas of life.

3. Jesus leads us to embodiment

How are we to engage in this mission? I have already hinted at the central method of mission for the future church, and in a sense it isn't new; it simply needs to be rediscovered. It is incarnational mission, or embodiment. It is central to who God is that he reaches out to us through becoming one of us and demonstrating in the life of Jesus the love he wants to express. 'As the Father has sent me, so I send you', said Jesus (John 20:21).

This is more than lifestyle evangelism, which means witnessing through deeds. It is the integration of word and deed, just as we find in the life and teaching of Jesus. We work to make visible the Good News of Jesus Christ by what we say and what we do, which are only two facets of the one task. Mission has too often been a matter of what we say: from a pulpit, from a street corner, in a tract, at a rally, or on a religious TV show. In a suspicious world, where the church is seen as irrelevant, where televangelists and clergy are disgraced by immoral behaviour, and where theories are cheap, we need a message grounded in our lives.

Embodiment always means expressing the gospel in a way that is unique to me, to us, to our area, to our denominational tradition. It means developing an

Australian Christianity and not just borrowing it from overseas.

Embodiment means a special concern for the poor, the vulnerable and the excluded, as we follow the life and teaching of Jesus. If the future church is a wealthy and comfortable church its witness will be blunted and its message distorted.

Embodiment also means living out the call to Christian community, offering (in industrial society at least) a real alternative to the fragmented and individualistic lives so many people lead. The pursuit of Christian community is an underestimated aspect of mission. Learning to live supportively, joyfully, simply, justly and worshipfully will make the future church a beacon that can't be hidden.

In summary, mission in the future church will be far more exciting and complex than was mission in the church of the past. It will be risky, uncomfortable, demanding, and yet full of grace and overflow and humility.

Discussion Questions

1. Do you agree with Ross' understanding of how our understanding of mission has changed? What are the implications of these changes for our churches?
2. In what ways do you think your local church is in a missionary situation? How are you responding to that understanding?
3. Discuss what it might mean to 'embody' the Gospel in Australia today? And in your area specifically?