

# The End of The World as We Know It

## Church-planting in postmodern Europe

### Introduction

Mission strategy in recent decades has focussed on the importance of church-planting rather than just doing evangelism, that is, combining Christians in new communities for worship, teaching, fellowship and mission. Evangelical Christians are fond of their statements of faith, yet we frequently work to a far more visible method of calculating orthodoxy, that is, consistent and frequent attendance at church on Sundays, and midweek as well if possible. At the church which I attended after first becoming a Christian, the minister had a favourite saying; "What does the story of doubting Thomas tell us? Never miss a meeting, you don't know what might happen!"

Catholic professor and Dominican Edward Cleary comments on this; "Latin American Pentecostalism shares characteristics of religion in the United States. Specifically, it places exceptional emphasis on congregational participation and worship attendance as a measure of religious involvement" (IBMR 28/2, Apr 2004, p51)

But have we ever in fact stopped to consider why evangelicalism functions in this way?

"I have sometimes felt that the real purpose of church services is to enable clergy to count the congregation. This is probably a little cynical, but churches often find their main sense of success in the number of people who attend on a Sunday. Regular church attendance is seen as being a significant test of spiritual health, and church growth is measured in the size of congregations. The importance of Sunday attendance and congregational size can never be underestimated for solid church" (Pete Ward, *Liquid Church*).

Across Europe we find a massive interest in spirituality. In a continent that is generally prosperous, and where even its poor can generally not be said to be starving, there is a desire for something beyond material possessions. People are searching for meaning, for transcendence (something beyond themselves), for identity. But they are generally not looking at churches for this. It is not uncommon to hear people say of themselves that they are "spiritual but not religious", with the church being included in the latter category. All too often, we have created communities where spiritual experience is tied to meetings and membership, as well as participation in a whole host of other institutional activities. The spiritual seeker looks at the social price tag, and looks elsewhere.

And this is not an issue that is reflected only in those outside the church; it can be found in Christians too, and even in missionaries:

"Problems arise when younger missionaries are expected to plant churches according to a model that they themselves find boring and irrelevant. It is not uncommon to find young missionaries whose only motive for attending church is a latent sense of Christian duty, and who come away each week wondering why they bothered to go. Such a situation cause problems at three levels : the personal spirituality of the younger missionary who faith is weakened, not strengthened, by church attendance; the ineffectiveness of the missionary as evangelist and church-planter (after all, why draw people into a church where you rarely meet God?); and tension and division in the missionary team itself" (Peter Stephenson, *I still haven't found what I'm looking for*, in *Postmission*).

So what are the roots of this change, and what should we be thinking and doing about it?

Part of the reason for this is that our understanding of community is changing.

### **Community and church in pre-modern, modern and post-modern societies**

In pre-modern societies, communities were based around land and a sense of place. The parish system served well across Europe as a way for the church to reach all those, rich and poor alike, who owned, lived or worked on the land in a given place.

The modern era was characterised by a significant change, which affected the way that churches were organised. Emigration, urbanisation and industrialization meant that the land and the parish became less important. Community was reconstituted in the expanding industrial cities on the basis of shared culture and shared experience. Class, not place, became the most important signifier of identity. Churches emerged with an emphasis on congregation and club, where people gathered to worship with those who were like them, rather than those who lived in the same village. Working-class and middle-class denominations arose.

The postmodern era changes our ideas of identity and community again. Identity is not based on a common sense of place, since we are all more able to be highly mobile now. Nor is identity based on common experience or social class. In his book, "Bowling Alone", Harvard professor Robert Putnam shows that across all types of social association, such as religious affiliation (church attendance), union membership, participation in parent-teacher associations and the number of volunteers for civic organizations such as the Boy Scouts and the Red Cross, involvement has declined in the last fifty years. The title of his article came from his discovery that, while more Americans go tenpin bowling than ever, participation in organized bowling leagues fell 40 per cent between 1980 and 1993. This is not a trend that affects America alone. Putnam shows that a decline in the level of social engagement is also evident in Europe. People are meeting together less frequently in organised groups.

The very concept of personal identity is more fluid and changeable in a postmodern context. Our identities are more complex, more changeable and less certain. The postmodern world creates new forms of fragmentation and dispersal. In modernity, human identities were kept securely in place by clearly-defined class and gender roles. Now we have the freedom to choose our identity, to change it, to succeed or fail alone.

Sociologist Zygmunt Bauman comments:

"What emerges from our fading social norms is naked, frightened, aggressive ego in search of love and help. In the search for itself and an affectionate sociality, it easily gets lost in the jungle of the self. Someone who is poking around in the fog of his or her own self is no longer capable of noticing that this isolation, this solitary confinement of the ego is a "mass sentence" to which we have each been individually condemned".

In such a context, many churches base their outreach strategies on the offering of community and identity to those adrift in an uncaring world. These strategies usually take one of the following two forms:

#### 1. church as heritage site

In the premodern era, the worship of the church was part of a commonly-owned culture. In the modern era, the church was closely related to the aspirations and experiences of different social and ethnic groups (or 'people groups', as we now call them). As living expressions of a past era, church has for some taken on a historical character. This is not a turn-off for some – the weekly visit to church becomes attractive precisely because of its historical flavour. The church is valuable because it preserves the traditions of the past and makes them accessible to new generation. Its music, architecture and literature are prized for being artistically significant. In effect, the church becomes part of the heritage industry (like the National Trust), and the emphasis lies in preserving for future generations that with which we have been entrusted.

#### 2. church as refuge

The fluid, ever-changing environment of postmodernity offers little support or shelter in the face of overwhelming change and almost unlimited choice. In these circumstances, people look for safe and welcoming places where they can find a sense of togetherness and safety. When a wider sense of community has all but eroded, churches develop into places of refuge where we can retreat for a while. In home groups, Sunday school, youth ministries and social activities we can meet people who share our values.

The bigger the shelter, the more comfortable it becomes, and more people it can accommodate. Some churches have turned from being a refuge into being a resort; no longer a place for emergency help, it becomes an attractive place for a vacation, or even to live in all year round (Christian schools, Christian business directories, etc). And so people retreat from the wider world and wonder why they have no appreciable impact upon it whatsoever.

The problem for each of these models is that while they have responded to some small degree to the postmodern society around us, they do not take it seriously, nor do they consider how they can express the gospel fully within that culture. They are throwbacks to an earlier age, and look like ill-fitting imports from another place. They degrade the full implications of the gospel, which is that every culture, including postmodernity, can be inhabited and transformed by Jesus Christ, and they confuse the practice holding on to past structures and practices with faithfulness to the living God. The possibility of engaging effectively in mission with our surrounding culture is reduced, because by becoming a heritage site or a refuge, they have become (and are perceived) to be separated from ordinary life.

So what might a postmodern church look like?

#### 1. Communication, not congregation

If congregation was the normative model for the church in a modern era, then communication will be the dominant theme for the church in postmodernity. The growth in fragmentation and individualism leads some to conclude that community is dead. But I think that this is wrong. It is not dead – it is just different. People still want to be with each other, to find significance in relationships, and to make a difference in other people's lives. But in our postmodern context this is not expressed so much in organised meetings; it is expressed through constant communication. Cell phones, email, instant messaging, photo and video messaging – millions of European young

people have developed new forms of connectivity. It is community based on communication rather than meeting. But it is more than a virtual community, since these young people also meet face-to-face regularly. The network church needs to take this form of communication seriously.

## 2. Leadership by example

Modern churches ordain those who are safe and steady, and who will lead from the front (of the meeting). Postmodern church will not be able to rely on meeting, on visibility of attendance, and on authority. People are free to shop, and will gravitate towards those who they perceive as enlightened, who have something special that is worth hearing or learning from – these people will be the real leaders, regardless of their position. Leadership will be by influence rather than control. Those who are perceived to have met with God, and who have been changed by him, will be the guides, the teachers who lead into holy and passionate living for Jesus Christ. Already we see congregational leaders being supplanted in influence by spiritual directors, those who will guide into a spirituality that goes beyond the safe confines of the congregation.

## 3. Integrated or separate?

This is an interesting question (hence the question mark). In “Mission Implausible”, Duncan McLaren suggests that it is the more sectarian forms of religious belief that are thriving in Europe at the moment. Yet a different approach is endorsed by a recent letter-writer in Christianity magazine (February 2005). Writing about football chaplaincy, Steve Goddard writes, “I would like to see informal fans chaplains appointed (wearing “Revaldo” on the back of the team shirt?) who travel with the faithful to away matches and become a seamless part of what are vibrant, caring communities”.

## 4. Experimental diversity

The “one size fits all culture” is dead. We expect tailor-made products and services in many parts of our lives today, and this corresponds to the postmodern celebration of diversity. It took 800 years to evangelise Europe the first time round; we won’t do it for the second time in our lifetimes. And we don’t really know which approaches to church-planting will work best. Michael Moynagh, co-director of the Tomorrow Project, writes “churches in the New Testament seem to have been diverse. Indeed, diversity is one of the hallmarks of the Holy Spirit”. He quotes retired Archbishop of Canterbury George Carey, “the Spirit never leaves identical finger prints”, and adds “God has built experimentation into the fabric of creation. It is part of being human. It will be part of successful church-plants as well”.

## **Creating postmodern network churches in 21<sup>st</sup> century Europe**

In this paper I have set out a vision for the future of the church in Europe – a network church, not a congregation, based on the reality of contemporary postmodern community, not the nostalgic communities of refuge that many of our churches have become.

So I leave you with a question, which I hope also doubles as a vision; can existing mission organisations and churches make their expertise available to a new generation of Christians, helping them to communicate the true spiritual life in Christ with their peers, to build new forms of Christian community based on communication rather than congregation, and to allow a new generation of charismatic leaders to emerge who will have the kind of impact on postmodern young people that we can only dream about?