

A Church without Walls

Presbytery of Irvine and Kilmarnock

2003 (Year 2) Community and Mission: Commendation I

Introduction (Report A.1.1.)

“Follow me”. The Church of Jesus Christ will want to be shaped by the Gospel of Jesus Christ to be a community that expresses the life and love of Jesus Christ. That shape is not about structures. It is about the lives of individuals and congregations being shaped by the “mind of Christ.”

From the outset the Commission has heard the plea for changes in structure, but has remained convinced that changing structures without changing mindsets achieves little. John Tiller writes:

“The Gospel community relates to church structures as a new building to the scaffolding which surrounds it. Reforming the structures is like reorganising the scaffolding: it may be necessary but it does not in itself alter the building. Creating alternative new structures is like replacing the scaffolding: it may be useful, but then it may be a waste of time.”

(The Gospel Community, p 51)

Jesus’ imagery of new wine in new wineskins has often been used to refer to new church structures, but Jesus first used the illustration to address the “structures of the mind”. The inherited mindsets of the Jewish leaders could not accommodate the life of the Kingdom of God. The subversive ministry of Jesus was hidden and deep. The Temple became redundant, but he did not lift a finger to its physical structure. In time a “Temple of living stones” was to replace it.

The shape of the church in each village, town and city of Scotland will emerge as we take time to “follow Jesus” through a saturation in the Gospel stories. We recommend that each congregation choose one of the Gospel writers as their pastor for the coming year and let them teach us about following Jesus. Matthew will speak well to those who value order and history, and sow subversive seeds of the Kingdom. The outcome will be to turn the congregation inside out and from past to future. Mark will suit the activists. Here is a manual for active discipleship, introducing us to the way of the Cross. And if, despite the reality of the resurrection, we are still afraid, we find ourselves in good company. Doctor Luke is for those who value the call of the Spirit to prayer and to mission, but watch out for the challenges about wealth and poverty. John is for the reflective ones who want to learn how to be a contemplative community around Jesus. He makes sure that our words about loving God are earthed in loving each other.

The challenge is for a congregation to live the reality of all four Gospels and so reflect the full glory of Christ's presence.

Imagine every congregation choosing to follow Jesus in the company of one of these pastors. Imagine little clusters of people meeting to read the story together. They are challenged by the truth they find and hold each other accountable for living by that truth for the coming week. Imagine the preaching and worship unpacking the story in fresh ways. Imagine pastoral projects designed around the Good Samaritan, the woman taken in adultery, the parable of the talents.

Imagine a finance committee studying Luke's accounts of Jesus' teaching on wealth and poverty. Imagine a church that decided to live for a year in "silent witness" on the instruction of Jesus: "By this shall the world know that you are my disciples because you love one another."

Imagine the impact on a society where "you tell me your truth and I tell you mine", if Christian people lived the difference by "doing the truth" with compassion, courtesy and courage.

We have reflected on the marks of a healthy church shaped by Jesus at the core and offer that for reflection in our situation. (Appendix 4: The Marks of the Healthy Church)

Commendation 1 (Deliverance C1)

Urge congregations to choose to study, reflect on and live by one Gospel for one year in the first instance, and let Jesus shape the life and structure of the congregation.

Summary What about - a Focus?

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2003 (Year 2) Community and Mission: Commendation 2

Introduction (Report A.2, A.2.1, A.2.2, A.2.3)

The primary expression of church is local. The Incarnation is our mandate and our model for being local. “The word became a human being and moved into the neighbourhood” (The Message).

The parish system at its best is one way of expressing that belief in the God who is as down to earth as that. Incarnational theology is in the DNA of the Church of Scotland.

Local means identity. The local congregation stands as sign of God’s commitment to that place. The local congregation is a community of God’s people, gathering to worship Him, encouraging one another to grow in knowing God in Jesus Christ, serving in Christ’s name and going to all peoples to make disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ. The congregation brings distinct gifts to the wider community by being distinctive itself. This distinctiveness arises from gathering to worship around the Story of the Gospel that transforms lives in word, sacraments, example and dialogue. The local congregation is the space where Christian life is nurtured in practical discipleship, earthed in the concrete realities of local life. The congregation shows the way by serving alongside the community and inviting others to become followers of Christ. For reasons of theology and missionary strategy, we affirm the local Christian congregation as the primary expression of the church. However, that does not mean more of the same! A congregation may avoid the challenge of becoming a missionary congregation. A congregation may develop a fortress mentality of isolation that is no longer a servant of the Kingdom of God.

Local means diversity. We have heard from rural communities and the Highlands, from City Centre and towns, and from Urban Priority Areas. Contexts vary and our vision is that every congregation discovers its own vision of being a worshipping, witnessing community. It is vital that congregations look at and listen to their locality. We recommend that congregations undertake a community review every ten years in the wake of the National Census.

We welcome the initiative of National Mission to make available to Presbyteries and congregations relevant information from the 2001 Census, and commend their resources to undertake such a survey in partnership with others in the area.

We have already acknowledged that people live in networks of communities. In the days when people lived, worked and worshipped in the same place, worship was the gathering of an already existing community. In a time when life is fragmented, congregations need to work more creatively at being real communities of faith. Without a Gospel community, there is no communication of the Gospel. The priority for the Church is the renewing, refocusing, relocating and planting of local worshipping congregations for mission across Scotland.

Local means interdependency. In the mind of the Commission the words “local” and “relational” have been inextricably linked. The God of the Incarnation is the God of the Trinity and God’s people will reflect God’s nature. A primary theme of the Body of Christ is interdependency, a mark of all mature relationships. Congregations that are independent to the point of isolation deprive themselves and others in the Body of Christ.

We have observed the way in which the Urban Priority Areas and projects supported by the Priority Areas Fund have developed support networks to help them face their demanding missionary challenges. Over the years they have been meeting in areas to tell stories, identify issues and develop mutual resources. Their example is to be commended for other groups of congregations. These groups may live in the same area or they may share similar contexts (e.g. Rural, City Centre or Suburban) or be developing similar initiatives (e.g. children’s ministry, worship, community development, evangelism, workplace ministry). The important thing is to move beyond isolation to interdependency.

Commendation 2 (Deliverance C3)

Urge congregations to undertake a community review at least once every 5 years to reflect on the issues, changes and missionary opportunities in the community in collaboration with others wherever appropriate and for this to be monitored as part of the Presbytery visit.

Summary What about - your Parish / Community?

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Introduction (Report A.3.3)

The title of a recent conference on evangelism was “communicating with absent friends”. Celtic motifs of pilgrimage and celebrating the good in our culture, Ignatian retreats on spirituality and faith accompaniment, business themes of mentoring have alerted us to a pattern of evangelism that comes alongside and travels the journey as a friend. We follow the Christ of the Emmaus Road who walked, listened, explained, intrigued and was welcomed as a Friend.

Amidst all the discussions about the shifts in our culture, there are certain recurring constants about our humanity, which take on cultural clothing. Those constants (“these three remain”) are faith, hope and love. Every human being yearns for trust in the beyond, needs a sense of purpose and meaning, and wants to belong. It has been shown that people “belong before they believe”.

The received wisdom was that people behaved well, believed correctly and then belonged fully. That is the way of legalism. The way of grace (and the way of our relational culture) is to give people a place of belonging, leading to opportunities of believing and then exploring patterns of Christian behaving- not churchy behaviour, but Christ-like behaviour. The success of courses like Alpha lies in the social focus of food and friendship as the context for discovering faith. We recommend that congregations explore the right discipleship path for their situation. The way of grace (and the way of our relational culture) is to give people a place of belonging, leading to opportunities of believing and then exploring patterns of Christian behaving- not churchy behaviour, but Christ-like behaviour.

Commendation 3 (Deliverance C8)

Urge congregations to form paths for the spiritual journey to help people become Christian disciples in today’s world.

Summary What about - “Searchers”?

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Introduction (Report A.3.8)

In our globalised world, where 51% of the world church is now in the South and only 3% of the world church is Presbyterian, we take a humbler role in the world and accept the gifts of “reverse mission”. Environmental concerns and economic imbalances link us and challenge us to make new lifestyle choices in a global context.

In the culture of the “World-Wide Web” we are only too aware of globalisation in communication, economics and politics. The Church is in a position to lead the way as a global family. When the effects of globalisation are likely to depersonalise and marginalize, the church can stay local globally by establishing living links with churches in other parts of the world. We recommend that local congregations explore with World Mission how they might establish such partnerships.

Commendation 4 (Deliverance C12)

Urge congregations to research an area of the world church and establish a personal partnership with a congregation or project.

Summary What about - a link with the “World Church”?

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Introduction (Report A.3.9)

The relational church recognises our interdependence in the weave of creation, and our call to be an example as good stewards of God's creation. We recognise the angst among younger people about the future of the planet and recommend that churches review their policies on energy and consumer goods, and raise awareness of those aspects of contemporary society that will hurt or heal the environment. We commend the resources of the Society, Religion and Technology Project and the calls to earlier General Assemblies for congregations to conduct an environmental audit.

Commendation 5 (Deliverance C13)

Urge congregations to explore ways of being more environmentally aware and responsible as a witness to the Christian care of God's creation.

Summary What about - concern for our environment?

Note For more information on environmental issues within congregations, visit the Society, Religion and Technology Project website on <http://www.srtp.org.uk/scecong3.htm>