

Mission Shaped for Humanity

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I couldn't help very strong feelings of *déjà vu* – or perhaps it was just age – as I read through *Mission Shaped Church*, with its updating on 'church planting' and 'fresh expressions of church'. Yet if that is the intention, discussions across the church must still take account of a whole range of other enterprises and movements – unmentioned in *Mission Shaped Church* – where Christians have found other ways of 'being church' for more than half a century! Many are ignored or treated as 'failures' as the institution in the last few decades has busied itself with liturgical revision, internal re-structuring and ministerial wrangling.

Take, for example, the entire history of Industrial Mission: surely one of the most remarkable attempts to engage with the culture of the industrialised west. More than forty years ago and before many of us were in ministry, Archbishop Michael Ramsay and others talked about 'going to where people were' rather than expecting them to 'come to us'. *Mission Shaped Church* makes never actually claims the notion is new – but it gets close to making it sound as if it might be. The real difficulty is putting the idea into practice and accepting failure. It was 'Ted' Wickham, appointed by Bishop Leslie Hunter, who really believed there was a mission-field out there in Sheffield's Steel works and who led chaplains directly on to the shop floor. He invited workers to 'join God's union' not by sending them 'back' to local parish churches but by trying to help them *be* community in one of their networks – their place of work. Yet the mission was often met with discouragement and disapproval from those who saw the parish model as the only way of 'being church.'

Alongside that, there continue to be developments in sector ministries. In shopping centres, commercial centres, schools, prisons, hospitals, academic institutions, in barracks and battlefields you'll find chaplains hard at work. But they're sometimes treated as if they are not quite engaged in the church's mission at all, working perhaps at some kind of 'holding operation' until people can later 'return' to the 'real church'. Yet they too are *being* church in a different way.

Then there have been religious orders and other individuals rooting themselves in other people's territory. They're a presence in disaffected old pit villages, run-down housing estates and in a variety of other urban settings where partnership work goes on in addition to, and collaborating with, dedicated parish clergy. It continues to be a ministry engaged as a presence in local culture, but it's unglamorous, often hidden, frequently costly.

And what about the church's 'entry' into the most obvious of networks – people's places of work? The Church of England has Ministers in Secular Employment. *Mission Shaped Church* only mentions them in a footnote and then gets the definition wrong! They understand their ministry *at work*. They currently minister in hospitals, schools, laboratories, on farmland, and in public utilities all the time being a presence that at any hour of the day may lead from human engagement to gospel comprehension. But the institution is entirely two-faced about them and they're often ignored. Why? Because they don't help prop-up the parochial system. Yet, if its right to challenge that 'propping-up' – and *Mission Shaped Church* does so – then the ministry of the MSE must be heard, encouraged and embraced. What can we learn from the presence that they try to be? What is their understanding of 'being church' and 'being Christian' in human networks and in cultures far removed from the parish church?

When all this is put together with industrial mission there are other things to consider. What are our different interpretations of mission? What do we mean by 'success' or 'failure'? What criteria do we use to determine these things and discover the difference? Are there ways of being church out there we haven't even thought of? Above all, how do we engage with structures good and bad, with the large-scale stuff, with a divided Britain, with social exclusion and social injustice? It's many of the long-standing enterprises already mentioned and rooted in communities for decades that can help to give us some of the painful answers.

Mission Shaped Church sometimes gives the impression that mission is essentially about evangelism, proselytising, conversion, the gathering in of the lost for fellowship and praise, rather than a living and often painful engagement with humanity out of love. Better surely to enter the real world of café and club culture than set up your own non-alcoholic versions.

But *Mission Shaped Church* does make helpful theological points and especially its reminder of the incarnational thrust of Anglicanism: we are about God's mission, not our own; the community exists because we have a mission not 'vice versa'. But that's precisely what many in the church have been trying to do in the second half of the 20th century. But having reminded the reader of Anglicanism's incarnational emphasis that focus suddenly evaporates! Yet we cannot afford to ignore examples and lessons especially when they've apparently 'failed'. So often ventures have been dropped or strangled in adolescence because they didn't 'succeed' or because they threatened the parochial model and *Mission Shaped Church* rightly warns against taking such a narrow view. But that's the whole point – that's precisely what 'incarnational' mission will often be about. Some of these ministries in the eyes of the world (and especially in the eyes of some Christians hell bent on 'going for growth' or 'success') will always be 'failures'; some will get smashed up, others won't reproduce and we'll have to start all over again. If *Mission Shaped Church* is suddenly being seen as giving the church permission to do 'new' and engaging things, lets at least embrace and learn from the wealth of engagement that developed in the past and continues in the present.

We should be thankful that *Mission Shaped Church* will encourage a dialogue long overdue. But let's also find some common understanding of God's mission to humanity in other people's territory, our part in that, and the right criteria for measuring success and failure. And in trying to do so, let's engage with and learn from all those courageous men and women past and present whose work in the world never gets a mention. Not to do so will prove catastrophic. As one of my old teachers has said, 'in its mission, the church and its eucharist is not a club for the redeemed, but for the healing of humanity'.