

evangelism

Building Missionary Congregations

Yes, but how?

Number 3

A Change Process for the Local Church

Practical Ideas for Action

Robert Warren

**Published by the Anglican
Diocese of Southwark**

Church
—
Society

“It is necessary for congregations to make their own discoveries when they try to understand what God is expecting of them today.” Towards new community in mission, WCC.

No one can tell a church what it needs to do to become a missionary congregation. The reason for that is simple. It is the church discovering for itself how to respond to the call to participate in God's mission in the world that brings about the shift into mission mode.

However, that does not mean that no one else can be of help. Indeed having an outside Consultant/Facilitator often shows that a church is taking this shift seriously. Such external help can achieve a number of things. It can help us to face the awkward questions, which we are often colluding with each other in avoiding. It can point us to resources beyond the local level we are not aware of. It can help us understand the inner dynamic of the local church (answering the question 'what's really going on here?').

Another way we can receive help is by being given 'a track to run on'. That is the aim of this article. It outlines a five-stage process which suitably applied, can help any church seeking to bring about the fundamental shift in mission mode.

Step One: Stop

If fundamental change is to take place, we have to take time, and work on a longer perspective than the usual 'what shall we do in Lent this year' sort of framework. The first article in this series identified a number of ways in which churches could simplify their ways of operating. This can give space and time to stop.

Another way is to set up a Think Tank to explore missionary congregation ideas for six months (meeting monthly?) before attempting to consider any possible actions. Such a group can work together by reading, talking (including giving people permission to think the unthinkable), and using such material as *Launching a Missionary Congregation*; planning a Whole Church Day, or PCC Open Day to give thought, attention and prayer to consider these issues is another way of furthering these ideas. Somehow we have to break free from the tyranny of the urgent. Remember:

“The urgent things are rarely important, and the important things rarely urgent.” President Eisenhower,

and - 'most people overestimate what they can achieve in one year, and underestimate what they can achieve in five years'.

Step Two: Look

Look outwards and seek to cultivate a greater understanding of the world around the church and the worlds in which church members live. Remember there is not just the traditional geographical community around the church, but a whole series of inter-locking 'worlds' which people inhabit. These worlds function sociologically not geographically.

Read about the changes taking place in society today; especially *From Here to Where?* by Graham Cray. Also *Our World in Transition*, by Diamuid O'Murchu is a helpful introduction. Get people in the group to keep an eye open for newspaper and magazine articles that help understand the major changes taking place in the world around us. Begin to identify how the church can be the church in appropriate ways in this setting - and where it is not at present.

Step Three: Listen

To the members of the church. To the hopes, concerns, needs, desires and issues that they have and are addressing. Listen to members involved in the local community, education, health, business, unemployed worlds and what they see as the issues and needs there. For example, get teachers (young mothers, business people, the unemployed) together (at a PCC?) and ask them to talk about the issues they face. Then consider how well the church gives resources to enable such people to function Christianly in that setting.

Listen to those engaged in bringing about change in local government, health and education, worlds. Read about 'learning organisations', in particular *Change forces*, by Michael Fullan, especially chapters three and five, and Peter Senge's large book, *The Fifth Discipline*. It has much valuable material that relates to developing a healthy organisation/community. There may well be people in the church who, in their daily work, are already engaging with these insights and issues. Draw on their skills. Build up an understanding of how change takes place, and why most efforts at change create problems rather than solutions.

If possible find someone to act as a Consultant/Facilitator, but make sure they have the skills to help you discern, decide and do what you choose.

Step four: Design

Now (after six months) you should be in a position to begin to understand what are some of the things which might need to change and how change is most likely to happen.

Keep your eye on purpose and fit/change the structures of the church's life around that.

Empower people, avoiding a provider/client relationship.

Work with the whole church through the issues.

Avoid a pre-packaged plan imposed on people which they are then expected to implement.

Let the church design the vision (seeking to develop a 'bottom up' design).

Go for the next step, and avoid 'the grand design'.

Step five: Walk

Change is a journey not a blueprint. Take steps, one at a time, together. Have the courage to monitor each step, admitting where things go wrong and learning from mistakes.

Be open to how unanticipated exterior events (vicar moving, Church Commissioners losing £800m, motorway being built through the parish, etc) can change plans. Be responsive rather than rigid to such external events - use them to build possibility thinking into the church's response. Remember the key is changing the ethos to one of openness and honesty; and empowering church members to develop their own solutions. Make sure the leadership is orientated around permission-giving rather than control and permission-withholding.

Don't forget to enjoy the journey, and build in times to stop along the way!

For advice or assistance in the area of Evangelism please contact:

The Revd Jerry Lepine, Adviser for Evangelism, Croydon Area Mission Team Office, 020 8681 5496/7 or at home on 01737 822322 or the Revd David Fudger, Woolwich Episcopal Area Evangelism Adviser on 020 8691 8884.

A Southwark Diocesan Evangelism Resource. Reproduced with permission.
Revised January 2001.

Further resources @ Diocese of Southwark Website: www.dswark.org/bcs