

# evangelism

## Building Missionary Congregations

Yes, but how?  
Number 6

## Renewing the Church Around Spirituality

### **Practical Ideas for Action**

Part One - The Wide Angle View

Robert Warren

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**Spirituality: how we encounter God  
and how that encounter is sustained.**

Spirituality is a large, complex and elusive subject. This is the first of two articles in the 'Yes, but how ...?' series on the subject and looks at the spirituality of a community, culture, and church. The next article in the series will deal with the narrow-focus perspective of spiritual resources for the individual - through the local church.

## **The spirituality of a community**

We cannot safely consider the spirituality of a church without paying attention to its context. This may manifest itself in a number of ways.

- ***The spirituality of geography:*** by this is meant the effect that the physical setting has on the community and church. For example, a vicar from the Fens reported that the vast, often grey and unchanging, landscape and scenery of the Fenlands, brought occasionally to vivid life by a glorious sunset that transformed the whole sky-scape, was mirrored in the spiritual life of the church - generally rather monotonous, but subject to occasional moments of great insight, and moves forward. We need to be aware of the pride/power of being on top of a hill (think of some of our great cathedrals), and of the sense of depression of living in a low-lying area.
- ***The spirituality of history:*** what has taken place in an area can have a profound effect on a community. Walter Wink, in *Unmasking the Powers*, tells of two rural churches that refused all efforts to join them together. At one point someone said to the archdeacon 'you can't expect us to join with them, they didn't tell us when the Danes were coming!' Equally, nearby villages whose inhabitants were on different sides of the Civil War have also found uniting a deeply disturbing experience - witness the way that

conflict in Northern Ireland has shaped the very nature of the faith (spirituality) being expressed.

- **The spirituality of trauma:** sometimes history and geography combine, like a volcanic explosion, to freeze a community around one specific event which fused history and geography. For example, a church found all attempts at evangelism frustrated because of a 'wall of frozen anger' associated with the closing of the local mine in the mid-eighties.

## **Addressing the spirituality of a community**

Identifying the spirituality is the first task. What to do about it depends on the nature of that spirituality. There is no one right way. Wisely, the church facing 'frozen anger' held a memorial service of thanksgiving for the pit (on the tenth anniversary of its closure). The service not only looked back with thanksgiving for what the pit had given to the community, but also looked forward, including thanksgiving from the younger generation that they would not have to go down the pit. It is too early to know what impact that will have.

## **The spirituality of a church**

This can be likened to the personality of the church. Biblically, it is what is meant by the angel of the church to which the Revelation letters of John are addressed. There is a fine, illuminating exploration of the nature of the angel of a church in Walter Wink's book, *Unmasking the Powers*. We need to understand what that is if we are to make significant change in the church. Here are some stories that illustrate this dimension of spirituality:

### **Hero Trinity**

in his important work, *Congregation*, James Hopewell tells the story of one church whose personality, or mode of operating, was that of hero. Everything it did it did in hero mode. Whenever there was a need in the community it rode in, proverbially speaking, on its white charger, took an attitude of 'leave this to us we're the experts', and thereby disabled the whole community.

### **Thomas the Twin**

Back in the 1840's the labourers of a northern industrial town decided to build a Methodist chapel. The wealthy landowners around were distressed, and set about building an Anglican church as quickly as possible - making a race of the work. The Methodists won by a couple of months, but the legacy of two churches locked in competition lasted for over a century. It may well be that even the name of the church (St Thomas, one of a pair of twins), a Freudian slip - revealing that it was conceived as one of two churches.

### **The Chantry Chapel**

A church found its building had a deadening effect on worship and evangelism. Tracing its history, it discovered that it was set up as a Chantry Chapel to be a place where the souls of the departed lords of the manor were prayed for. Death was all around.

## **Identifying the spirituality of a church**

It is vital to have some understanding of the spiritual history, personality and tradition of a church. This can be done in a number of ways.

- Getting someone to read up the church's history.
- Getting stories from older members to tell of the great days, and days when things grated.
- Asking key, usually not logical or linear thinking questions such as:
  - 'Who, in history, does this church look most like? (eg Atlas: solving all the problems of the world. Peter Pan: congenitally reluctant to face the real world, etc).
  - Ask people to complete the sentence 'our church is like ...', getting them to give a descriptive answer. At one church someone said 'our church is like a shop window ... with nothing in it'. It certainly got discussion going!
  - Ask people to identify the secret script the church is performing. For example, one church member said 'we follow the latest idea ... until it hurts ... then we move on'. Another said 'our church's text is 'The truth shall make you right' (distortion of John 8:32).

## Addressing the spirituality of a church

Walter Wink makes the important point that the angel/personality of the church is not changed by praying at or for the angel, which is essentially passive (and can be good, bad, or usually a mixture, as were the churches in Revelation); but rather by the church, once it understands its spirituality, making moral choices before God in response to that truth/revelation,

e.g:

- *Hero Trinity*: choosing to listen, and work as junior partner with other agencies.
- *St Thomas*: twinned up with the Methodists, and held a Gift Day when the Methodists decided to re-order their building - cooperating rather than competing this time round.
- *Chantry chapel*: held an All Soul's Night Vigil for the true rest of the departed.

Although these stories are about 'one off events', real healing comes about through a much longer process - in which symbolic events can have great power. Those moral choices are about the conversion of a community as a way of life, not just a passing moment.

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.

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## Notes