

evangelism

Building Missionary Congregations

Yes, but how?

Number 8

Renewing the Church Around Spirituality

Practical Ideas for Action

Part Three - The Whole Picture

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Church
—
Society

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The previous articles on this subject have looked at the spirituality of a community, and of a church; and also at developing the spiritual life of church members. This article in the series considers spirituality from the perspective of the search for faith/spirituality in today's culture.

Starting 'out there'

Such an approach takes as its starting point a key missionary congregations' principle, namely the need to 'stop starting with the church'. A missionary congregation is one that seeks to participate in God's mission in the world. That involves a conviction that the Spirit not only did brood over the waters of chaos at creation to bring order out of that chaos, but also that the same Spirit is brooding over the 'chaos' of our culture. One aspect of that is the search for spirituality, which is probably fuelled by two particular excesses of our technological culture. First, is that such a culture does a brilliant job of taking things apart (the atom, the DNA code), but struggles to make sense of the whole. Second, such a culture - out of its technological achievements - has become a consumer culture focused on material goods. That very materialism fuels a hunger. 'There must be more to life than an upturn in the economy'. It is these two factors which explain why 'holistic' is so key to contemporary spirituality.

Historically it would seem that 'starting with the search within the culture' is how mission has usually proceeded. Jesus was preached as Messiah to the Jews because they were looking for such a One; as Logos to the Greeks, for that was the centre of their concern. Equally 'creation' was the theme picked up in Celtic lands by saints such as Cuthbert, Ninian and Patrick; just as 'liberation' has been the theme of the church in South America. (*see note 1*)

The search for faith

There is a widespread search for meaning, values, and spirituality in today's society. Just looking at the subjects in magazines, or the

books on shelves in bookshops that come under such headings as 'religion, astrology, self-help, spirituality', makes it evident that the search is on. It is important to note what this search is for - it is for 'personal spirituality', as distinct from 'organised religion'. Sometimes there is an overlap, often they are seen as opposites. Certainly it is likely that only in so far as Christianity as organised religion can make its own spiritual tradition accessible, is it likely to gain a widespread hearing today. Indeed the inaccessibility of that spiritual tradition may well explain why many are turning to Eastern religions. 'Fewer and fewer persons are attracted to Christianity in the 'First World' countries because there is so little spirituality in religion'. (*Matthew Fox, Creation Spirituality, p.74*).

Outlines of the search

There are many outlines of the search for spirituality and the shape of New Age teachings. Here are two, overlapping pictures (*see note 2*).

a) From Manifold Wisdom (Wesley Car, SPCK)

Creation and nature are central

... there is a sense that the human species has reached the end of the line in abusing the planet.

Holistic worldview

... talk about quantum theory and Buddhism is thus possible in the same breath.

The irrational

... including those superstitions which have been on the whole derided during this century.

Control

... whatever the format, New Age thinking addresses people's anxiety about control.

Peace

... The longing for harmony and order in a world which feels increasingly alien.

b) From The Search for Faith (Church House Publishing)

Being in control

... the sense of purpose is itself related to the affirmation of self-worth and to the ability to control.

Feeling good

... the need for people to feel good about the human body and to acquire feelings of peace and harmony with the life environment.

The future and hope

... the desire to know the future before it happens and the need for messages from the transcendental realm.

The natural world

... feelings of interconnectedness with all of creation, without losing sense of the supremacy of self.

Engaged and distinctive

The point was made in *Building Missionary Congregations* that, in a missionary context, the church needs to find ways of being both engaged and distinctive. The primary model for us in this is Christ, who in his incarnation was fully one with us, yet reveals another world to us. If that is so about the church, then it needs to be expressed in its spirituality, hence the next two sections which explore how a contemporary spirituality can engage with the search for faith, and yet also expresses the distinctives of God's revelation to us in Christ.

Making gospel connections

A good missionary principle is to begin by looking for the connections between the Christian message and the search within the culture. They include such points as follows:

Creation

The Biblical culture was largely rural, and from the opening chapters of Genesis to the closing chapters of Revelation, has much to say

both about creation and the new creation. There are rich seams of greenness in scripture on which we can draw.

Control

The focus on control is about the freedom of the individual. A good case can be made out for the assertion that individualism is the inevitable long-term impact of the gospel on a culture - affirming the worth of every individual. It is important to affirm the worth of each person, and their being loved by God. Equally our 'choice culture' is affirmed in the story of the Garden of Eden, where 'right choices' are shown to be what life is about. With it goes a costly refusal by God to 'control' those 'choices'. Rather He redeems the consequences of wrong choices.

The irrational

Although Christians would want to talk about the 'trans-rational' rather than the irrational, yet again there is much in the Christian tradition and practice that points to the artistic, to symbols, rituals, and poetry. 'The powerful stimulation of the senses which is unified in, for example, Orthodox worship, is fragmented in these New Ages practices'. (See note 3).

Hope. A century which started with almost blind belief in 'progress' is ending with something close to despair. Orthodox Christians have shied away from eschatology (the study of the End Times) because of what the Sects and extremists have made of it. It is time for the church to re-connect with eschatology and show how hope works and to what it rightly points. This is a major neglected area of the teaching of Jesus waiting renewal.

Identifying gospel distinctives

If the Christian tradition gives us much that relates to the spiritual search in today's world, it also calls us to a distinctive way of seeing each of these issues.

Creation

Christianity is not pantheistic ('everything-is-divine'), but seeing that everything has a built-in relation to God. So Jesus says 'even the stones would cry out', and the Psalmist talks about creation singing

God's praise. We do not worship nature, but we share in its worship of God - 'let the trees clap their hands'. God and creation, deeply related, are yet distinct. We, as part of creation, find life by living as 'creatures before the Creator'.

Control

The Christian faith sees the dangers (as well as the health) of the desire for control. Spirituality can all too easily be about 'getting power/control over my life'. Christ's lifestyle shows that wholeness and fullness of life reside in responding to love, not getting power. It witnesses to the power of love, rather than the love of power.

The Irrational

Helping people to get in touch with feelings, creativity and wonder/awe would seem to be an essential discipline for the spiritual health (and connectedness) of the church today and a valid means of communicating the Christian faith.

Hope

This is a major neglected area of the teaching of Jesus waiting renewal, and an orthodox interpretation and application. It may be that the theme of 'new creation' is the right one to work with in this area.

Values

Another current area of concern in society is the discovery of values. (Witness the impact of Frances Lawrence's campaign). That is a European concern too. The Christian faith would argue that values do not exist of things which one can take 'off the peg' but rather are choices one makes in response to relationship with God. The Beatitudes provide the church with some strikingly distinctive 'values' - they are 'upside down values'. It may be that our first task is to live them. To do so, is nothing less than to practice our spirituality. Doing that is likely to prove the best way of proclaiming it, and thereby, the gospel.

Building spirituality patterns into church life

How all the above might affect the way the church functions is, in many ways, the crunch issue. It is what really matters. Some point-

ers as to how that might be done is the subject of the next article in this series. Watch this space, and remember:

Our fragmented society needs a whole series of 'reflective pools', places where the very deepest issues of life and death may be explored and understood away from the cut and thrust of the marketplace.

Terry Waite, Taken on Trust

Notes

1. *We Drink from our Own Well*: by Guistavo Gutierrez (SCM 83) is a fine example of the spirituality that is foundational to liberation theology. *Christianity Rediscovered*, by Vincent Donovan is a moving story of someone developing a Christian spirituality in an African context.
2. (a) From *Manifold Wisdom* by Wesley Car (SPCK, 1991), pages 14-40, and

(b) from *The Search for Faith and the Witness of the Church*, produced by the Mission Theological Advisory Group (Church House Publishing, GS1218), pages 78-94.
3. *The Search for Faith and the Witness of the Church*, p.82.

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