

# **Living the Christian Faith in an age of extremes.**

## **Believing – Belonging – Sharing**

*Paper presented at: ‘Perspectives of Christianity in Europe in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century’ International Ecumenical Conference at Vsetin, Czech Republic 23 -26 September 2004 by Terry Drummond*

### **Introduction**

In this paper I want to explore issues associated with living the Christian faith in the secular society that is England in 2004 drawing on experience of my work with both churches and local communities in Croydon. The context is an urban London borough whose population is larger than many cities; the residents are representative of many different cultures and religious in a total population of 330587 the 2001 census recorded the following returns of recorded religious faith.

	%
Christian	65.07
Muslim	5.34
Sikh	0.4
Hindu	5.08
Jewish	0.3
Buddhist	0.48
Other religions	0.55
No religious affiliation	14.71
Religion not stated	8.08

The reality behind the figures is of course that the number of Christians recorded are reflecting the English attitude that it is better to be something rather than record no religious affiliation. I say this based on the fact that in our churches we will find less than 10% of the population actually attending worship in any week.

The opportunities that this offers to the churches and those concerned with faith development can not be underestimated and I believe it should encourage us to consider three specific areas that are a challenge to the Christian community.

- Believing
- Belonging
- Sharing

In reflecting on these themes I also want to suggest that we live in ‘*An age of extremes*’ a phrase used by Eric Hobsbawm the Marxist historian as a title for one of his books. The extremes are identified in the social and political culture that underpins our society, which includes fear of terrorism, the poor/rich divide and the insularity of so much of our society a factor that is reflected in many local communities. The lack of any sense of belonging is in part due to pressures of the life/work balance where quality time is lost due to heavy workloads that leave little time for being involved in the community. In an age of extremes community becomes a key word that underpins the challenges we face.

In the UK, the government has initiated a debate on *community cohesion* which arises from problems associated with the racial divide in some towns and cities. The importance of the debate of how we build up a better sense of community is one that the churches with other faith groups should be making an active contribution.

In a recently published report the contribution of faith was affirmed in the following points relating to faith communities:

- *They gave in-depth knowledge and understanding of local neighbourhoods, their histories and the issues that are important to them*
- *They are the centre of networks that cover wide areas, networks that reflect the moral commitment characterising faith activity and the informal and voluntary setting in which they operate*
- *They have traditions of reflecting on and propagating the values needed for healthy communities (1)*

The report includes another 6 points and calls on both national and local government to be active in developing partnerships with faith groups.

In an age where religion is often identified with extremes this is a positive contribution that recognises that in building up a sense of community faith can play an important part. It is also in contrast to the largely secular philosophy that underpins most of public discourse where religion and faith are on the whole dismissed as irrelevant.

In considering the role of the churches in building up community it is important that we are prepared to be active in public debates about the kind of society we want. I am not suggesting that we need to be active in proselytising, rather that we need to undertake continuous theological reflection on issues of public policy. The challenge is to contribute to the debate with arguments that challenge the view that religious perspectives have nothing to contribute to the policy agenda.

The challenge for Christians in this context is to be open to differing and critical perspectives, our particular contribution will be rooted in an intellectual understanding that is both contextual and relational. The context is where we begin and we must be willing to learn from one another through our relationships. In Croydon this means being in a dialogue with people of other faiths and the policy makers. At the heart of all communities the churches (and in some communities other faith groups) are a constant feature of activities that underpin the building up of community. The key outcome of such reflection will be a commitment to building on the diversity that is central to the Christian tradition, it is from this point that we can begin to explore the themes outlined above. The theologian William Storrar writing of experience in Scotland puts the case in this way:

*“This Scottish experience shows that where the churches make the connection between their public engagement and their witness to the Gospel – in an understanding of mission that includes both a critical affirmation of the political dimension of life and a healthy suspicion of any final and unexamined identification of the Gospel with any particular cause – then an authentic Christian social theology can flourish even in the midst of institutional shaking and shrinking of the mainstream, established churches.” (2)*

In this paper I want to suggest that we can not afford to be either timid or triumphalist in our faith. We are being called into an active dialogue with the wider community and for this to be effective we need to understand our context and the churches we represent.

## Believing

The statistics at the beginning of this paper offer an important insight into the religious scene in one borough; they equally reflect a national picture from the 2001 census that identified religious belief as follows:

	%
Christian	71.6
Muslim	2.7
Hindu	1.0
Sikh	0.6
Jewish	0.5
Buddhist	0.3
Other religions	0.3
No religious affiliation	15.5

The figures for Christian belief offer an interesting insight into our understanding of religious faith and belief, because it shows a population that seems not to want to lose their religious affiliation. In her work the sociologist Grace Davie identifies this with the term *believing without belonging*. This perspective on Christian belief is summed up by Davie in this way:

*“Indeed most people in this country – whatever their denominational allegiance – express their religious sentiments by staying away from rather than going to, their places of worship. On the other hand, relatively few British people have opted out of religion altogether: out and out atheists are rare”. (3)*

The churches in Croydon represent the widest perspective of theological outlooks from what might be described as conservative through to those that take a liberal approach to both theology and worship. An interesting factor is the number of people who regularly attend worship a comparison with inner London would suggest that church going is still a part of the culture for a slightly larger percentage of people than is the case in other areas.

It is possible that this reflects the suburban nature of the community and it is important to note that most churches offer worship at the same time on a Sunday without seeming to ask if in a 24/7 society if people might respond to worship at offered at other times.

It is also important to note that there seems to be commitment to maintaining models of mission and outreach that hardly reflect a changing society both economically and socially. In an age of extremes the churches continue to offer stability and an unchanging approach that in 10/15 years time might be seen to be outmoded and irrelevant.

In presenting this case it is important to recognise the continuing commitment across different age groups to being regular and committed to worship and faith. The problem is of course that the worshipers reflect a minority within the community. The successful churches for want of a better word tend to be the new churches that are rooted in a conservative evangelical approach to belief. It is in these churches that many young professionals worship. The theology of these new churches is on the whole very conservative and in many cases judgemental of society and what the churches leadership believe to be wrong in society.

A major group associated with these churches have been the black majority churches or as the black theologian Robert Beckford calls them *urban churches*. The tradition of these churches whose membership is drawn from African and Afro-Caribbean communities and are Pentecostal in origin. In recent times there is a growing awareness that a holiness model of worship and

theology needs to be developed to being more socially active. In a major change of emphasis there is a growing awareness that the churches have a key role to play in supporting young people from their communities who often face problems of exclusion and alienation.

The growing awareness that builds on the holiness model of theology and worship offers an opportunity for a new understanding of believing in a culture where religion is still an important part of daily life, in particular for the middle aged and elders.

The mainstream churches may have something to learn from these changes of approach and may also have much to offer from their experience of secularisation. The problem for all faith communities is a growing alienation by young people who find the churches less important than other activities. A dialogue between these very different churches could open up social partnerships that reach out to the wider community.

In so doing it is important that the contribution of churches to community life is not underestimated. The government of the UK recognise the contribution made through the use of buildings for community use and the promotion of values and yet the churches are seemingly less aware of the contribution they make.

In research undertaken in North West Croydon during 2003/04 it is reported that faith community buildings offer an important resource for community activities. The wide range of activities on offer include work with refugees, luncheon clubs, baby clinics and a wide range of clubs for people of all age groups. In many cases the users may well be identified as belonging to a particular church building through their commitment to a club or piece of work whilst not belonging in the sense of being a member. In addition it is important to ask questions of church members as to whether they are aware of all that goes on in the building that they use for worship. The insular approach of so many Christians means that they belong and worship but have little contact with the wider community in which the church sits. The call to discipleship seems to mean that believing and belonging are important whilst action from discipleship is not a part of the contract of being a Christian. If this is the case the message of Jesus in Matthew 25 is lost and church members might be following in the footsteps of those who prefer to see religion as a predominantly private affair.

In seeking to identify an active approach and response to believing the challenge must be to overcome the problems of a privatised church that does not contribute to public debate. In the UK (as noted above) we have a government that is promoting the contribution of faith communities to building up communities we can not withdraw into a inactive religious faith that is all about belonging and believing without challenging what is perceived to be wrong within society.

The theologian Christopher Rowland in an essay quotes the American layman William Stringfellow and I believe that these words offer a serious challenge to the churches of today: *"...the ideal 'confessing' church. It is spontaneous; episodic; radically ecumenical; irregular in polity; zealous in living; extemporaneous in action; conscientious; meek and poor". (4)*

A believing church that truly belongs within our contemporary society might well take these words as a slogan for action. This leads on to the questions and issues associated with belonging.

## **Belonging**

In this section I want to explore the question of what we mean by belonging in our society. In the churches the answer is of course a commitment to the life and worship of the community of faith. The obvious examples are those people who are regular attend Sunday worship though in many cases this may now mean up to two visits a month rather than a regular weekly attendance. It is

also important to ask what that attendance or membership means is it a once a week experience or are church goers contributing to other activities at other times in the week.

The issue is one of the availability of spare or free time. In many households the adults are committed to busy working lives that leaves little spare time or energy to contribute to the life of the church or the community. The North West Croydon Research identified church premises being used for many community and voluntary activities though they might be organised by non church members.

The wider argument in this area is the increasing movement away from individuals or families sharing in community or social activities an issue identified by the American sociologist Robert Putnam in his study of the decline of civic participation and social capital in the United States '*Bowling alone*'. His argument being that in the United States there is a move from people meeting in clubs and voluntary associations to undertaking activities on their own. The example being a move from Bowling clubs to people bowling alone. In this way any sense of belonging is lost leading to a potentially fragmented society where there is little or no sense of community. The effect on churches of this approach is clear in so far as an increasing number of people will become detached from anything other than regular or occasional worship. The sense of community which is at the heart of Christian community and theology will be lost and any sense of belonging will be focused on the individual creating a privatised religion that reflects the consumerism that underpins our society.

Robert Putnam also makes the linkage to religious commitment and participation. His analysis argues that the post war generation of 'baby boomers' will not be active in churches and they will not contribute to the life of the community in a the same way as their parents he writes:

*"Even for those who remain who remain religiously inclined, privatised religion knows little of communal support and exists by and large independent of institutionalized religious forms; it may provide meaning to the believer and personal orientation but it is not a shared faith, and thus not likely to inspire strong group involvement ... 'Believers perhaps, but belongs', not."* (5)

The problems for all institutional churches become that of survival at what point do churches become so financially that closure is the next step. In Britain's rural communities many churches have been closed due to the reducing numbers of worshippers and members. In many rural communities that are served by the Church of England the incumbent clergy are expected to be responsible for anything between 3 and 12 parishes all with church buildings and small numbers of regular and committed worshippers.

In these communities that might retain a sense of community and belonging the church is very much the place people call their own whilst not being active in its life and worship. The sense of belonging in this context might well see the church as being a part of the community without anyone asking who is to cover the costs of maintenance.

The whole church needs to consider appropriate forms of mission and outreach for the present generation a task that in these areas is going to be lost due to the pressures of the upkeep of buildings.

In reflecting on the issues associated with the sense of belonging and it is impossible to separate the issues of maintaining the infra structure against the task of building up a sense of community. The privatisation of religion in this way takes individuals and families out of the mainstream of sharing with others to picking and choosing from an option that is a pick and mix of traditions and styles of worship.

An additional issue that requires reflection by the churches is the appeal of non traditional forms of religion. The growth in *New Age* therapies and religions may only be a minority interest they

cannot be ignored, analysis of the attraction of these religious forms may assist the churches to understand what people are seeking.

The issues associated with believing without belonging requires consideration by all the churches and must lead to questions about the how Christianity can be shown to be relevant for each generation. Equally it is important that the churches seek to identify ways of encouraging those people who are infrequent attendee's can be brought into the life of the community.

It is too easy to say that most churches and church based committees are introverted and only concerned with the maintenance of the structures. It does seem to be the case that discussion of mission and outreach will often take second or third place to a discussion of an issue of seeming importance only the truly committed. It may be that those taking part are so much a part of the structures that they truly belong and therefore are failing to recognise the decline in those who are committed and have a sense of belonging.

The challenge to the churches is clear and if we are to overcome the problems I have identified we need to give serious thought to the question of sharing the faith. If we fail, it is important to ask will there be a church to belong to in 50/75 years time?

### **Sharing**

The Christian faith is an evangelistic faith in Matthew 28 at the point of the ascension Matthew records that Jesus tells his disciples:

*“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember I am with you always, to the end of the age.”*

In this command which was no doubt added by the author we actually have the basis for the history of evangelistic outreach that is so central to the history of Christianity. The church in England tends to associate this approach to the sharing of faith with a certain approach to theology and religious thinking. The evangelical approach with its commitment to sharing the faith through direct mission in the style of Billy Graham or the mission church in the back streets belongs to a particular tradition.

The reality is that most English people are not attracted by the idea of people who are active in wanting to share their faith and religious belief. The fact that so many claim to be Christian does not detract that they prefer not talk about religion and will often see it as being divisive if brought up in conversation. Even those who might believe without belonging are reluctant to enter into discussion of faith and its meaning.

The seeming success of the Alpha training programme which in some places does seem to have attracted people into faith based discussions is an exception. The attraction of a meal and small group discussion may be counter to my argument above about most people not being attracted into situations that demands contact with others on a regular basis. The Alpha model may have much to offer in encouraging churches to think about new ways of sharing the faith.

In considering how the gospel might be shared with the wider community it is important that we do not lose sight of the need for a sense of mystery and the possibility of recovering community. The sense of mystery may be an element of the attraction of new age religions and therapies in offering a sense of something unknown they transcend materialist boundaries. The sense of mystery is still found in some churches and it is important that this is not lost, equally it is important that the churches in this tradition make newcomers feel welcome and accepted.

A report in the *New York Times* of February 18<sup>th</sup> 2004 focused on new places of worship that were being established in disused warehouses. A key part of these new initiatives was darkened spaces where people could be quiet and contemplate surrounded by candles with burning incense. The report which was based in part on one of these new churches 'Blues' in Minneapolis included the following comment:

*"Many emerging churches including Blues have revived medieval liturgies and practices, including prayer labyrinths and lectio divina, the sacred reading and prayer over a short biblical passage. Some borrow Roman Catholic or Eastern Orthodox rituals that pre-date the Enlightenment."*

In a subsequent paragraph the report goes on:

*"Since the churches are diverse their number are elusive, but the Web site [www.ginkworld.net](http://www.ginkworld.net), lists more than 300 emerging or post-modern churches."*

A visit to Philadelphia Cathedral made on February 17<sup>th</sup> 2004 revealed a church with an open space, well lit and with no sense of worship or spirituality. The paradox was obvious the warehouse offered space for quiet and reflection where as the cathedral felt like a meeting room. The believer who does not belong may actually be looking for a space *to be* where an exploration of faith and discipleship might take place. In this context with an open ended leadership it might be possible to draw people into a better understanding of the journey of faith. To be effective these new places of worship must be able to offer the seeker a feeling of being valued whilst they can also feel that they belong. In this way the challenge that is described above of believing without belonging is being addressed in a less formal but equally valuable place of meeting and worship.

The challenge to the institutional churches is one of being willing to consider new models of church that are appropriate to the needs of today's generation of seekers. The concentration of worship at a specific time on a Sunday morning could be reconsidered, for instance if we want to attract children would a weekday afternoon be more appropriate? It is important to recognise that Sunday's are now a day for shopping, sports and other activities.

In seeking to address the needs of young adults is not possible for worship to be organised at times and places that are appropriate to their needs? It will mean identifying models of church in non traditional places where young people meet such as pubs and clubs, a ministry that meets people where they are is one that could be seen to be relevant to those who are seeking to understand and find meaning in their lives. To be effective this will require lay and ordained ministries that are focused and rooted in non church premises where people meet. In his book *'Church Drawing Near'* Paul Avis writes of this model:

*"The radical diversification of society of society must call forth from the church a corresponding diversification of recognised ministries – 'niche ministries' if you like – so what the Church can touch the whole range of sub cultures and life styles with its mission."* (Citing Nazir Ali *Mission and Dialogue*) (6)

The challenge of identifying new ways of reaching people is one that all the churches need to be open to exploring. It will lead to questions of what kind of ministry is required and in particular what are the most appropriate forms of training for those who will be working in what can only be described as a mission field. The traditional training for being responsible for a church building and all that this involves might not be relevant to new approaches.

In addition the development of new models must be rooted in a theological tradition that is open to meeting people on their own ground. The questions that will be thought through in this arena will demand the Minister is rooted in a strong faith that is open to challenge whilst not seeking to

impose pre conceived ideas on to the listener. Whilst the Christian message is timeless the context for sharing the faith can and must influence the way people are addressed and approached. The key to new ways of sharing faith is bound up in a willingness to take risks whilst being open to the Spirit of God who speaks to his disciples in the most unusual ways.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper I have sought to address the question how churches can identify an effective mission for an age where religion and faith are not as important as they have been in the past. It is a perspective that is based on experience within the English scene and would benefit from contrast with the experience of other European countries and that of the United States.

The decline in active church membership set alongside the statistics of people who record themselves as Christians needs further consideration. In particular we need to identify ways of drawing on the good will associated with believing into active belonging that leads to a better understanding of faith and discipleship.

The future for the churches in England must be in finding appropriate points for making connections with the wider community. A key element in this process may be building on the opportunities offered by government in their deliberations on the role of faith communities. In addition it is of equal if not more importance that the churches at both the local and national level give serious consideration to issues of mission and outreach.

The risk we must avoid in the development of new models and approaches is not to be so focused that we lose sight of the fundamental truths of the gospel. In an age where the market economy is paramount the church must not become one more part of the secular market where the individual can choose from a variety of different options. The central theme of the message remains the same the challenge is to speak to a generation for whom God is an unknown concept.

The future of the churches must be based on a vision for society that recognises that there is ground to be covered if we are to reach out to those who are on the outside looking in. We have a history of mission from which we can learn much and in the words of St. Paul:

*God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not to reduce things that are, so that no one can boast in the presence of God. He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption in order that, as it is written, 'Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord'*

## 1 Corinthians 1: 28-31

If we take these words to heart we can seek to respond in an effective and appropriate manner knowing that we are following in the steps of the apostles.

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