

Twenty First Century Challenge

Some dreams,
thoughts and reflections

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Looking to the future - 2010 and beyond some dreams, thoughts and reflections

You do not need to be a 'futuring' expert to know that the world in 2010 will be unimaginably different from that of 1998. In the light of current developments - in society, industry, culture and elsewhere, the future could resemble an Aladdin's Cave or Pandora's Box . The impact of technology, the consequences of global warming and environmental issues, world wide urbanisation as cities grow at incredible rates, [especially in the developing world], changes in education, in the way society functions, developments within Europe, patterns of trade between regional trading blocks around the world, health issues, global soccer and other sporting leagues, the influence and power of the media, home shopping v shopping malls, larger and faster planes and fewer airlines, the Internet and the world wide web and their 'spin offs', music, popular culture, feminism, sexism, ageism, racism, nationalism, post modernism -and much more will ensure that the world of a thirteen year old in 2010 will be radically different from the Spice Girl wannabe's of today.

There are many who are commenting on this exciting, yet unknown, future including Michael Moynagh of the Tomorrow Project, based at St John's College Nottingham. Mike has raised some key issues and aspects concerning Young People, the Church and Technology. Some of his thoughts and those of others on a range of associated themes, are included below and prompt some tough questions as we reflect on the issues around post modernism, a post literate society and the shape of the church in tomorrow's world.

The present rate of rapid social change, and its anticipated increase, renders it difficult to identify precisely what forces and factors will impinge upon, affect and shape the lives of young people in areas of life such as; leisure, education, work, environment, globalisation, urbanisation, Christianity and other religions and the exploration of the spiritual. Can we imagine likely scenarios ? What might be some of the possibilities ?

In this complex scenario the church faces what appears to be a make or break situation. A sense of over contentment with the status quo, resisting any change until the last minute, comfort and complacency, defensive thinking and low priorities have generally been the characteristics of the church when it comes to facing work and involvement with young people and its ensuing changes and challenges, to say nothing of its salt and light roles in society as a whole. To ask ' What might be the shape and form of a church which is relevant to young people and how might it become a reality raises huge questions and issues let alone tackling the practical implications. It seems too obvious to state but until the church comes to terms with culture, takes contextualisation seriously, looks over the parapets and becomes a risk taking, vulnerable community the continuing gulf between church and young people will remain. Statistics confirm that youth work is declining, a fact known to youth workers from way back.. Yes there have been exceptions but by and large it has been a case of holding on to what we've got rather than facing the missionary challenge in a society where 90% of young people have no contact with the church. In all honesty who can blame or criticise young people ? They want to know if the church is concerned for them as people or whether are they viewed as some form of insurance in order to keep things going and maintain the status quo. 'Where is it really at ' is a question to be asked.

the context

The processes of secularisation and post modernism have led to;

- a breakdown in traditional patterns of belief
- the disruption of family life
- the fragmentation of the family
- the growth of pluralism which renders all truth claims equal
- the disappearance of the big story
- a shift from intensive manufacturing to an information driven service delivery system
- changes in the social order
- a redefining and understanding of tolerance
- rapid social change and the growth of technopolis
- less hostility towards the spiritual
- the growth of a 'pick and mix' style of faith and belief
- a multiplicity of choices

To work through the implications of these statements and facts demands honesty, realism and a genuine commitment to change, where change is called for and is needed. Is it time, for example, for the church to again restate that absolutes are not totally negative? How does the church handle the tension between a pluralistic society which holds a world view that all truth claims are equal and the truth as it is set out in scripture with its uncompromising statements regarding truth, Christ and God's word? There is a real need to face the issue of culture, to effectively contextualise the gospel [without sliding into syncretism], to understand the difference between tradition and traditionalism, between inherited faith and the biblical pattern.

There is no consensus regarding the definition or understanding of post modernity. It has been said that 'We live in an age which cannot name itself'. Among the fallout of post modernity are some key principles which impact directly upon work with young people;

rationality:

there has been a broadening of rationality from its narrow enlightenment origins - so that metaphor, symbol, sign, imagination and ritual are being re evaluated leading to different dimensions of understanding

choice:

there are fewer, if any, pre determined choices and no longer any imperative or need to feel bound to tradition and the multiplicity of choices leads to more critical attitudes

relationships

in relationships there is a reaction to modernism's individualism - recall what happened in the nation following Diana's death and a rare sense of collectiveness

Some implications for youth work

Dr J Prins [S Africa] comments

*'youth should not be approached as though they present a problem.....
The problemis how the church can be church in the post-modern times'*

The tradition of going to church, for what ever reason, carries less weight. Babin states

'young people who go to church go because they look for something beyond - radicality, meaning and love, a sense of purity and even enthusiasm and mystical experience '

Is it likely that unchurched young people might display similar approaches and reasons? DiGiacomo suggests that

'the majority of young people see God not as Creator, Lord and Judge but as Friend, Lover and Companion'

There are some who would agree to this reality, indeed a visit to a Delirious concert might well provide some 'proof' of some form or another. Young people today have been described as a 'me' generation and perhaps there are elements of this within what is now viewed as the norm. In the light of scripture's revelation of God as Creator, Sovereign and Lord there are dangers and risks in an experiential, self seeking approach to the spiritual. We could ask if the many innovative expressions of current approaches and understandings to worship and celebration detract from or underline the significance and place of God in the lives of the young. As these different, and sometimes fresh and disturbing approaches inevitably enter church life and begin to make their impact some hoary questions emerge. If we can presume upon an older generation's greater spiritual maturity, understanding and security of faith, should they not be the ones to show and demonstrate this maturity, making room and space for a younger generation's more emotional experience of faith? [and vice versa?] This latter point illustrates the reality of a move away from the conceptual, the logical and the rational towards emotion and feeling. The danger here is that too much emphasis on the experience might undermine the place of teaching, though it depends upon how teaching is defined.. Communicating only through image and symbol may impose limits on the ability to conceptualise, reflect and make decisions and consequently may also raise the spectre of over dependence and manipulation. It is worth noting, as far as teaching is concerned, that there is a greater emphasis in the post modern world on learning through active personal involvement rather than in the traditional lecture style of the sermon or other forms of input or exposition.

Young people want to make their own choices but to do so they require not only clear leadership but also to know all the relevant facts and acquire the necessary skills. Leadership should promote role models which illustrate the contents of the Gospel and the good news. What do young people expect from the church as far as assuming any leadership roles? Churches are generally reluctant to seriously consider leadership potential amongst the young or to develop ways of enabling youthful leadership to emerge. Church leaders are generally male, white, over 40 and highly educated and leadership capacity is generally judged more on 'degrees and professional status' rather than as 'gift'.

Christian young people live in a world which is now more pluralistic than ever and the need to equip and enable them to live as those whose faith is integrated and reflected in their everyday living is vital. The dangers of dividing life into the secular [weekday] and the sacred [Sunday] must be avoided.

Other factors which impinge upon and determine action and response include;

religious individualism means less loyalty to the church

[hence the sense at events such as Greenbelt that denominations are not top of the priorities of young people]

the need for relationships remains paramount

young people's own decisions and greater independence demands changes in learning styles

the issue of absolutes, morals, values and ethics needs addressing e.g. right and wrong

faith, spirituality, spiritual development and discipleship

Modern spirituality can take some strange forms and the events following Diana's death illustrate the point. Were those spontaneous shrines really making a statement regarding the nation's quest for spiritual meaning and significance? on the other hand they might have been an expression regarding the perceived failure of the church to deliver and to meet people at their real point of need - as against what the church has traditionally thought was needed or necessary. A recent N.H.S conference on spirituality was noteworthy for the mixture of confusion about spirituality and the certainty that spirits and souls exist. Julia Neuberger said

'I don't know how you define what we're talking about but we sort of know that we can feel it'.

What are those experiences in a technological, visually oriented and electronic culture which give young people that sense of awe and wonder? Do post modern young people have any sense of a transcendent power or force outside of themselves? or are they totally absorbed in the idea of self sufficiency and independence?

In any case the concept of faith is hard to explain and words are almost totally inadequate to describe the experience. Add to this scenario the explosive period of adolescence and young adulthood and the description of entering a minefield seems apt. It is impossible, and dangerous, to consider the spiritual in the lives of young people and at the same time ignore what is happening to them in terms of their development. It is no exaggeration to state that ministering to the spiritual needs of young people requires different styles and approaches as compared to those used with children and adults. The absence in most theological colleges of any in depth training, consideration and serious thinking regarding youth work says much.. Effective youth work is no longer a soft option. It demands more than one night a week. It requires a leadership which is free from other church roles and commitments. It needs the precious commodity of time - time to be there, time for relationships, time to be available and time which is not slotted or programmed into an hour or two once a week.

Among youth workers, as with many Christians, there is a lack of consensus regarding terms such as 'spirituality' and 'spiritual development'. Both ends of the theological spectrum have their particular insights and perspectives which sometimes give the impression that these are set in tablets of stone. The thoughts raised by Dave Tomlinson in his book *The Post Evangelical* are very relevant. He suggests that people, old or young, have been sold a flat pack of Christian basics, complete with instructions, that only allow one given model to be made. This model comes complete with its patterns of behaviour, codes, language and meetings. There is no

space for creativity or variation and if the model is not made 'correctly' or doubt is expressed then there must be something wrong. It might be more creative if they were given instead a box of Lego bricks or K NEX, containing all the basic building blocks that allow the possibility of constructing a range of differing models. W. Brueggeman suggests that;

'post modernity is characterised by its imagination'

The task of funding the imagination of young people as far as the spiritual is concerned therefore takes on great importance and challenge. Maggie Dawn takes up some of these thoughts;

'No formula, no statement of faith, encapsulates the exact meaning of the Gospel in such a way that it is good for all times and places'

If youth workers are to serve as 'imagination funders' they will need help and encouragement. Space to think through and reflect upon where they stand on the issues of spirituality and spiritual development and what 'being' church really means in today's world. Included in this process is the awareness of the impact of culture on individual lives and how this has shaped not only everyday life but also an individual's understanding and outworking of the Gospel. This will raise some interesting issues, questions and implications regarding the church and its way of doing things. It will prompt an ability to recognise just what has been inherited, culturally, in terms of faith, and where this inheritance differs from that which is biblical and foundational. The currently live issue of worship will take its place on this agenda to say nothing of church as community and the place of youth work on the church's list of mission priorities. Pursuing the spiritual development theme also raises some interesting and associated issues e.g. exploring where and how personal development and spiritual development come together. A case could be made for stating that authentic Christian discipleship must include personal and spiritual development. Do the terms 'faith development' and 'spiritual development' describe separate or shared experiences? Where and how do they overlap or diverge? Most Christian youth workers subscribe to a point of view that outside of an experience of faith in Christ little or no spiritual development takes place. Perhaps such a position fails to recognise the God given element of the spiritual in each human being. Spirituality has to be seen from outside of its religious straitjacket. If young people can be helped to see and understand that the 'spiritual' is the context in which all of life takes place then doorways of exciting possibilities begin to open.

This leads neatly to the whole issue of discipleship, an issue which features in many youth groups and fellowships. Presently 'discipleship' is a sort of vogue word covering a wide understanding and expressions of activity, processes and intentions replete with many biblical, theological and programme overtones. I believe that the time is ripe to take an in depth look at all that the church does around this aspect of faith. From observations current discipling practice features a course of twelve or twenty weeks or a confirmation course - you are disciplined if you complete the course. Scripture, and experience, suggest otherwise and indicate that discipleship is a life long experience. It is better described as an apprenticeship based on learning alongside the Master. Industrial history demonstrates the outworking of the principle and it is good to see the practice returning, albeit in small quantities. It is fashionable and trendy in a culture which is focused on 'self' and 'me', to believe that the individual is self sufficient and does not need others. The impact of enlightenment thinking and secondary culture has led to the conclusion that formal learning, the acquisition of correct doctrine and rational thinking are the only pathways to Christian learning and understanding. The sometimes arrogant belief that literacy is a pre requisite for discipleship only compounds the problem. To simply tick off what this church or that church has decided are the essential elements of basic discipling or Christianity falls short of the mark, no matter which gospel or epistle passage is selected. It must be, and has to be, more than this. The overriding reality of a post literate society, a consciousness that traditional book and print based approaches and practice commonly used are not delivering and a desperate need to grow and develop authentic disciples plus development all suggest that it's time to change.

In many churches and youth groups the discipleship group is often seen as the *raison d'être* or flagship of the programme. It also can give a 'feel good' factor to the congregation in general, creating an expressed opinion that 'our youth work is going places!'. Certainly the task of enabling young people to develop and deepen their Christian maturity is both awesome and a privilege but is there an over dependence on the group and getting the group over this set of hurdles or through these stations of faith, in this particular way, in this time and using these methods?

It has been said that

“God has so ordained things that we grow in the Spirit only through the frail instrumentality of another”.

The fourth century leader Basil told his readers to find someone:

*‘who may serve you as a very sure guide in the work of leading a holy life’,
whilst warning that ‘to believe that one does not need counsel is great pride’.*

Augustine likewise emphasised that:

‘no one can walk without a guide’.

Travel and journey, in the Christian sense, is best undertaken when someone is alongside, enabling the traveller to cope with a strange terrain, to prevent the taking of a wrong turn at the cross-roads or missing crucial sights, signposts and experiences. Somehow we need to recover the basics and remove some of the complexities which often mask the heart of authentic Christianity.

I suggest that a fresh look at mentoring could be a good starting place to find an alternative approach. With an emphasis and style centred on a relational, open and mutual interface, it is well suited to use with young people. Such a process might also sit more easily within a non book culture allowing the mentoree to raise those issues and concerns which are real at the moment and which have to be dealt with NOW as against working through an agenda and giving answers to questions not being asked. The latter frequently leads to information overload.

MENTORING is;

- # the forming of an **intentional relationship** between a young person and another person of Christian maturity
- # focused in **supporting** a young person in the development of a mature faith
- # **generally long term** and open ended - it may be a lasting/lifelong relationship
- # dependent upon **trust, openness, respect, love and two way communication**
- # not a counselling relationship
- # a **walk alongside** with the one being mentored
- # is about **discovery and journey**, encompassed with prayer
- # based on **acceptance** with no issue or problem being off limits
- # dependent upon the mentor and young person **working together**
- # focused on **action and reflection rather** than on ‘cramming’ or information overload

MENTORING majors on relationships

Discipling could focus on discipline and what must be done to get from A to B.

MENTORING and DISCIPLING are not counselling

they are about walking alongside

MENTORING is disciple initiated

DISCIPLESHIP is leader driven

MENTORING demands the investment of time, energy and prayer

A MENTOR

- # must have a living faith in Christ
- # must like young people and enjoy their organisation
- # should know their weaknesses and strengths
- # does not have to know all the answers
- # must have Christian discernment, wisdom and experience
- # must be an interesting person and able to relate faith and life
- # must be open, honest and avoid assumptions, pretence and stereotyping
- # must be non judgmental
- # needs a sense of humour
- # shares a real concern for young people
- # should be available to the young person at all times
- # should be a risk taker
- # needs a sense of vulnerability alongside a confidence in the Holy Spirit
- # is realistic about their imperfections

A Mentor is an alternative name for a Discipler

“ Mentors are guides to pilgrims on journeys through unknown territories”

Glenn Smith [Montreal]

MENTORING and DISCIPLING - some key principles based on the Model of Jesus and the twelve
[from Mentoring for Mission Gunter Krallman]

His style of mentoring was both informal and oral
He used everyday experiences as the classroom
He did not produce a discipling manual or evolve a formal teaching programme
His style was intensely personal and was always concrete
He engendered a movement designed to be activated and advanced essentially through the work of the Spirit rather than human striving
He mentored and trained using the triad of modelling, teaching and implementation
He knew and understood his culture and engaged in effective contextualisation of his teaching
He always acted under the empowerment of the Holy Spirit
He opted for unsophisticated, dedicated and committed participants
He called the twelve into a close personal relationship not into a programme or an institution
He shared his life with them in a very transparent way
He first made them his friends and then they became his representatives
He practised discipling as dynamic life transference through relationships
He never spoke abstractly about discipleship
He made himself readily available
He spent quality time with them
He enabled attitudes to be caught which beyond any truth taught
He was their model showing what he intended them to become
He lived what he taught
He focused more on their potential rather than their failures
He promoted their strengths, worked on their weaknesses and corrected where necessary
He placed a higher value on character rather than performance
He expected total commitment, integrity and obedience
He exposed them to faith challenges
He prayed for them and taught them to pray
He advocated and modelled servant hood
He trusted them with responsibility
He gave them leadership training rather than leadership education
He underlined the centrality of the work of the Holy Spirit as far as equipping them for future ministry and empowering to be effective disciples
He mentored them for mission - not for running church based programmes

Some hard questions arise and would repay an deliberate investment of time in wrestling with these questions;

What might happen if these principles were enacted as part of the normal youth group's discipling/mentoring process ?

What changes would the church community have to face if this model was adopted ?

Would there be an acceptance to some major changes in attitudes, expectations, leadership, programmes, time, corporate and individual prayer life, worship and celebration in the congregation?

Has the busyness of the youth programme made impossible demands on the leader's time to the degree that little quality time is left for what is at the heart of biblical discipleship ?

Has there been an honest assessment of the pros and cons of such a process ?

What impact would a mentoring approach to discipleship have on the young person and their life as a Christian ?

If this approach was adopted across the whole congregation how might it characterise and shape that Christian community and in the process develop a higher level of mutual spiritual accountability ?

How might the danger of over dependence on the mentor be eliminated ?

The possibility of one on one mentoring needs to be seen alongside the usual cell group expression as an alternative means of nurture. It is important to recognise the dangers which could arise from an over dependence on the mentor/leader by the young person being mentored or disciplined - for example should there be some form of help with literacy within the mentoring process to enable the new non reading Christian to have personal access to God's word ? Unless learning is first hand rather than second hand passed on information it will not sustain and shape a person's life.

Learning, in any context, can be defined as the discovery of personal meaning and the relevance of ideas to life. It is knowledge gained by study or experience, leading to personal growth, development and change. Significant learning is rarely painless and includes both emotional and intellectual processes. Learning can sometimes be individualistic and at other times very co operative. Group ethos and life among young people in a learning context can be very strong. Each person has their own learning style which implies that using just one style in any group will mean that what is said can simply miss a proportion of the group.

Learning takes place through;

- observation and watching
- doing, action and involvement
- experience and reflection
- personal study
- informally and formally
- reading
- listening
- interaction. discussion with others
- experimentation
- trying and failing

Learning also happens in relationships and learning experientially outside of these is not an easy task. Therefore some consideration has to be given to what gives structure and meaning to the range of relationships active at any one time and how this enables learning relationships.

church and young people

Church and young people has been, and probably will always be, a catalyst for disagreement and tension - unless some quite dramatic changes take place. There is no doubt that the church is facing change on a number of fronts. Negative and defensive reaction will only serve to underline the status quo and push the institution even further onto the sand banks of history and irrelevance. A positive willingness to face realities, re- order priorities and implement change may mean saying a fond farewell to organisation, institution and power and replacing these with organism, community and powerlessness. Loren Mead in his book 'The Once and Future Church' has reflected on some of the issues around church and its mission. He suggests that there have been two paradigms in church history. Firstly there was the 'Apostolic' paradigm covering the period from Pentecost until Constantine made Christianity the religion of the Roman Empire, followed by the dominant paradigm of 'Christendom'. In the former each local church, empowered through the Holy Spirit, sought to live by the example and values of Jesus. As a called out ecclesia, it had an awareness of being a faithful people surrounded by a hostile environment. The world was ranged in opposition to this community.. You only got into this community when it was convinced that you also held those same values and would stick with them, come what may.. It was intense and personal, with part of its life given to building up its members in order to fully participate in sharing the Good News.

In both of these paradigms the church had a different way of 'being' and of 'doing mission'. In the former the front door was literally the frontier into mission and everyday those early Christians crossed that boundary in order to witness. There was an 'inside' and an 'outside'. Appropriate structures had been developed to undertake this kind of mission. In the paradigm of Christendom Christianity became identified with the empire. This blurred the distinction between church and world - a distinct change from the earlier paradigm. The congregation became the church and the church was the empire. Citizenship became identified with personal religious responsibility. Therefore there was no longer a need for people on the local scene to see one group as 'church' and the other as 'world'. The missionary frontier disappeared from the doorstep and was instead seen to be 'over there'. It became a far away enterprise and part of foreign policy. That frontier became the

responsibility of the professional - politically in the person of the soldier and religiously in the person of the missionary. This gave rise to changes in structure and the way mission was undertaken. The congregation was replaced by the parish and all who lived in the parish became members of the church, for to be born in the parish was by definition to become a part of both community and church. Baptism therefore symbolised what was already a reality.. the ordinary person had a Christian responsibility to do certain things;- pay taxes, be law abiding, support the enlarging of the empire, to obey superiors and to back up the whole system. Whatever the benefits of this paradigm it severed the link between personal involvement and responsibility for mission. Personal aspects were carried out by those doing it on behalf of others, and more often than not they were in receipt of payment or wages. The local church became the support system for the specialists who were seen as the 'called and the gifted'. There could only be one answer and one way of doing things.

As this paradigm collapses around us today, and as we struggle to patch it up and keep it afloat, its roots, relics and impact still characterise some aspects of church thinking, action and mission. Increasingly there are those who sense that the church is in its last days as far as the Christendom paradigm is concerned. What has been fine in the past is no longer that which is needed in the face of a new millennium. Dave Tomlinson touches on some of these issues in 'The Post Evangelical'. He quotes John Drane who writes;

'The uncomfortable truth is that the church has been all too eager to adopt the secular standards and practices of our prevailing Western culture'.

Tomlinson continues

'The result of this is that people see in the church just more of what they see and reject in the outside world: hierarchies, bureaucracies and power struggles and they know that this is not what will bring them personal spiritual fulfilment'.

He goes on to suggest that this is an opportune moment for the church to divest itself of power and to follow the example of its Lord. Perhaps the greatest challenge is to consider how the church can best be contextualised in order to fully demonstrate not only God's concern for a broken world but also how the kingdom is revealed and made real in that world. Holding together the tension between 'kingdom future' and the reality of 'kingdom present', with its challenge of living as kingdom citizens in the here and now, will never be easy. It is however an expectation that the people of God should be living their lives in ways which demonstrate a set of values and a lifestyle which are upside down to those in contemporary Britain.

We do well to remember that a conversion experience [or whatever it is termed] is only the doorway into the kingdom. Jesus came preaching the good news of the kingdom of God [Mark 1. 16], not just personal salvation. All of this can be threatening and might set in train defensive and fearful reactions. The temptation to jump into a carefully prepared underground bunker, to shut the door on a hostile world and to do what has always been done may appear to be a comfortable option but is no real answer. The essence of the gospel and the kingdom are centred in vulnerability and risk taking so, in the words of a well known advertisement 'let's do it'. This surely was a characteristic of the church in the Apostolic paradigm

Models and pictures of church abound - Willow Creek, Toronto, Base churches, Ecumenical Partnerships, House Churches, New churches, Cell groups and so forth. But as Mead concludes

A new church is being born. It may not be the church we expect or want. It may not include our favourite liturgy, hymn or song, theological principle or even our denomination. The form of the new church is not in our hands. What is in our hands is the chance to respond to God's call. Those of us who are called into the church have a special vocation to work for the renewal and refreshment of the church, not as an institution out of the past but as a centering presence from which we may serve the world. We have been told that God is making all things new. God is calling us to participate in that new creation. We have also been told that God's time is now.'

The pros far outweigh the cons and with faithfulness to the biblical vision, insight and unwavering trust in the Lord of the church this world can be changed, making real some of the vision spelt out by Tony Blair in his speech to the 1997 Labour Party conference.

A further question poses a genuine challenge concerning current theological training and education. The patterns we have inherited may have been adequate in a time when mission was 'over there' but are they still appropriate and helpful now that the mission frontier is once more outside the front door? Does the theological training given to Christian ministers adequately resource them so that they in turn can theologically and missiologically educate and equip the person in the pew to effectively engage in mission in what is now a hostile world - resembling that of the Apostolic paradigm? Amongst all of this is the need to ensure that the skills, know how and insights regarding work with young people become a recognised and integral element of the curriculum in all colleges instead of the 'bolt on' options available in some institutions at present.

technology and the future.

Mike Moynagh's thinking takes a look at the future and suggests that developments in technology will for instance enable much more vivid, visual and computer aided worship, creating as it were new cathedrals of the 21st century. Some would say that the football stadia are our contemporary cathedrals - places where worship and celebration take place on a weekly basis. In a world where the visual is a vital element in current styles of communication the technological impact could be startling. Virtual reality will make its impact. The accessibility of the Internet to many people via the TV set could be significant. Think for a moment about Internet users creating their own multi user domains, playing games on the Internet and developing their identities [with several at one and the same time] leading to a confused and complex reality. When the church enters the scene and begins to talk about THE reality the chances are that there will be little interest, reaction and resonance. On the other hand the possibilities of using virtual reality technology in the telling and retelling of biblical stories needs to be grasped and developed in pioneering and creative ways. It could mean that the user of the technology could actually be there, experiencing the storm on Galilee, the drama on Mount Carmel and the wonder of that first Easter morning.

It is interesting to preview how the global dynamics of the world wide web and the Internet might pan out and impact on the typical church youth group. As the availability of this technology grows and as schools get plugged into the super information highway some things that have been assumed as 'given' might well change. Take this example. As one member of the youth group relates to those who share similar interests in cities, towns and nations from almost anywhere in the world it might mean that this young person has more in common with twelve cyber friends than with the twelve in the youth group. This new factor might have a marked impact on the relational dynamics within the local youth fellowship. If this is true then it might suggest that the local church also has to be part of this process, having its own web site and Email address, rather than despairingly holding up its hands and bemoaning the situation. There would be need to fund this opportunity. Some may not see it as a mission priority. The spin offs however would be considerable as an immediate and two way communication between the people of God in every culture and nation comes into being, enhancing learning and the awareness of God's world-wide family.

In this electronic world the issues which might loom large when considering the Bible and electronic culture have to be worked through. How did the Bible sound in its oral form? As the spoken word became written words, in the move from orality, how important were the sounds? and was anything lost in the process? Remember that the Bible is sounds recorded in manuscripts so that they could be resounded and retold at a later time. So much of scripture is narrative and at times I question whether its contents were ever intended to be texts to be studied, analysed or even expounded in expository and lengthy sermons. What then are the visual components of biblical text? The text relies on adjectives and metaphors, illustrations and examples and as the word is spoken so it engages with imagination and feelings of the reader or listener. Discovering a visual style which is true to the text will see a place for symbol, art, montage, photograph video, film, worship and liturgy, faces of living persons, historical documentary, dramatisations, and much more. Exactly how we make electronic connections between the contemporary, post modern world and the historical and cultural world of the Bible is a challenge yet to be faced. How best can the cultural context and symbolism of the first century be made contextual, real and relevant in the 21st century?

Within much biblical text and narrative there is often a dearth of content relating to things like the weather, the smells, fashion, furniture and all of the nuts and bolts of everyday life. Throughout history artists and others have used their imagination to bring the past to life, even though it was often set in the artist's real life world. The countless illustrations to be found in the Bible, in Bible story books and other texts are other examples which are both traditional and modern. It has already been noted that when we engage with the text we give our imaginations licence, allowing each of us to recreate the scenes for ourselves. Seeing the same story on video, film or CD Rom dramatically changes things as another person's ideas, thoughts and imagination dominate. Sometimes this can be helpful and at other times restrictive. It may well be that traditional theological styles of interpretation, which have been dominant, may no longer be adequate. This could lead to tension and disagreement as long held points of view and methods are challenged. Theology relies on abstraction and argument e.g. we have inherited an understanding that the Bible is all about theology whereas it really describes experiences of God. It might be that some new and creative hermeneutics theological may need to be brought into use if scripture is to be adequately interpreted in this new and rapidly developing electronic age. To some this is unthinkable, even traitorous and something to be avoided at all costs. But the risks could be well worth taking.

Throwing into this fermenting pot the dynamics of a post literate and non book culture, plus the fact that young people get most of their information from sources other than print, will inevitably raise other challenges and questions, including that of how people learn. The old ways have gone, regrettably some would say. Learning in the form of a lecture or sermon has been sunk by the torpedoes of learning alongside, reflection on experience, mutual discovery and sharing and observation in formal and informal contexts.

The challenges and insecurity of living in this post modern world means that people are looking for something which is secure. As some so called bed rocks of society are on the move and as change becomes a norm, that security and something to 'hang on to' becomes more important. Some may look to the church for this security. Some might want a church that does not change e.g. in language and liturgy for example and which gives a sense of timelessness whilst others look to the church for support and encouragement but not one that is distant, authoritarian and caught in a time warp. They seek for something which is more laid back and where the approach is relational and where there is no pressure to belong or to join.

This in turn raises the issue of evangelism and what is understood by the term. Old style missions and crusades may no longer be appropriate. If each Christian acted as those early Christians lived in the Apostolic paradigm did the organised mission would be redundant. Whatever strategy and approach is used you don't have to be an expert to sense that different approaches and methods are required when sharing with those who live an urban priority area, an outer housing estate, suburbia and the village. Whatever methods are used they should all be centred in friendship evangelism.

Statistically there are going to be fewer and fewer young people in an ageing society. This suggests a need for some serious thinking about aspects such as family services [assuming they are still part of the routine] Church will increasingly be seen as 'old' by young people [nothing ever changes] - alien and foreign to them and their needs, in spite of attempts to correct such a perspective. Youth congregations arising within a church or coming together from several churches are likely to become more prominent and even the norm.

Alternative worship - however defined - may go one way or the other and we might even see alternative worship for the over 60's. If we look carefully and below the surface it is possible to identify places where this already happens. Moynagh suggests that this pattern could even filter down to the 8-12 age group. Adults will be up in arms because they want to see the whole church together when perhaps youth workers are at last saying 'No way! - too many young people have been lost to the traditions and methods of the past.' A watershed has to be crossed if all age worship and celebration is to become something other than a struggle, a chore or an impossible dream ?

are we blinkered by books ?

The future may appear bleak for those who relish and delight in print, paper and books. Most church leaders are those who have lived in a world where print on paper has reigned supreme. To varying degrees the non book issue is slowly being understood as one of the major challenges facing the church. Using non book

approaches does not imply gimmicks or a watered down theology or a compromised gospel. Neither does it mean that O.H.P is the answer. It does however demand approaches and methods which are both sensitive to the needs and aspirations of non book people and which reflect the style and creativity of the Galilean carpenter. The fact that Christianity began in a non book culture is a constant reminder that the church has long sold out to enlightenment thinking and to secondary cultural forms and expressions. The church may be conversant with books but a large section of society is not. An ease with literature is assumed.

Reading a book is at one and the same time an isolating and individual experience yet is also imaginatively creative. Sharing the experience afterwards and checking it out with others is enriching and this experience helps to build 'community'. Reading is only one part of the process by which knowledge is acquired. Most of the teaching and outreach resources used by the church are highly literate - tracts, invitations, Bibles, song books, prayer books and even the notices. Teaching materials, to a large degree, assume an ability to think logically and conceptually and this from a white and middle class value base. In many ways we are saying that if these people are told from the front and on high the way it really is, then they cannot but learn what we are on about, for after all preaching is the only way ! It might be one way but it is definitely not the only way. When non book people come into a church, as on special occasions like Christmas, Easter or baptism and confirmation, the impact of print in the form of books could be very negative. Should any of them become Christians they will certainly struggle against the bias of the church towards those who read. Possibilities of exercising leadership will be overlooked or shunted into a siding.

There are some striking and basic differences between book and non book people:

Most church people think in words whereas most non book people think in pictures.

Book people learn alone, non book people learn in groups.

Book and church people prefer top down teaching whereas non book people seem to relish bottom up discovery.

Book people like handouts and notes, formula and details - non book people like questions, visits, swapping stories, humour, catchy sayings and colour.

Perhaps this sentence from Sally McFague sums it up;

Where theology becomes overtly abstract, conceptual and systematic, it separates thought and life, belief and practice, words and their embodiment, making it more difficult, if not impossible, for us to believe in our hearts what we confess with our lips'

Some reflection on these topics might lead to creative and innovative action and approaches and offer some clear guidelines as to shape and form of future strategy;

Is literacy an essential requirement for Christian growth and nurture?

[think about what is happening in the world wide church and where the church is experiencing most growth ?]

Before the invention of the printing press how did Christians nurture their faith ?

How is God heard and listened to ?

What is the place of symbol, story, parable and picture ?

Why have books become so dominant ?

Why are linear, analytical, conceptual and logical ways of thinking considered superior to storytelling ?

Why is the sermon more intellectually acceptable than the story - and which do people generally remember for longer ?

Why is faith, in our culture, 'cerebrated' rather than 'celebrated' ?

How do young people gather the essential information they need ?

How, in general, do people learn ?

What style of learning brought you the most benefit ?

Non book culture does NOT mean;

those who cannot read

working class persons

inner city or estate residents

those considered by others to be thick or uneducated

what young people are good at gets used.
learning should be fun.
repetition is acceptable.
there are positive and negative pressures to learn or not learn.
approaches and styles must be person centred.
evaluation has to be part of the process.
experience plays a large part in any learning process.
silence is not a total wipe-out.
vulnerability is creative and releasing.
residential experiences are invaluable.
norms and values can be challenged in non threatening ways.
Christianity is not presented in abstract or global concepts which have their meaning as
'ideas' in a philosophical framework.
the question 'What might the gospel feel and look like from their perspective is taken seriously.
the domesticated familiarity of the Christian worker with scripture is set aside.
God will not be slotted into tidy categories or formal creeds.

It might be helpful to pose these additional questions;

- HOW** do young people learn ?
- WHY** do young people learn ?
- WHAT** do young people learn ?
- what **BLOCKS** their learning ?
- HOW** does the church teach, generally speaking ?

What behaviour in learners blocks any learning ?

What behaviour in teachers blocks any learning ?

As the non book issues spills over into the church it is interesting, and perhaps disturbing to reflect and ask ourselves if our church is one which enables a non book person to feel at home. We could ask ourselves what changes we might be willing to make to make this happen. Assuming we can achieve this aim we then need to think through how we worship, celebrate, evangelise and disciple. When the issue of leadership raises its head its back to the drawing board as we rethink leadership training. Conversely there are others who contend that if the non book challenge is to be squarely faced, and if people are to be helped to discover scripture for themselves, then the church should initiate a 'literacy programme'. This attitude dangerously assumes a misunderstanding of the non book issue. It is not that people can't read rather that they choose not to read. For a small number of people the literacy approach might be appropriate. It is a reality in some US churches and might make sense here, remembering that most church congregations in the UK have amongst their members those with the skills to help others to read.

some thoughts around storytelling

The current interest in storytelling, the Open Book project, indicate that storytelling will be a key element within the non book issue and all of its challenges. The Bible is mostly narrative, though sometimes it might appear that it comprises just the gospels and some of the epistles. In the way that anthropologists use 'story' the Christian story is no longer part of our culture. It is no longer lived by, even within the church. It has been said that if a story gets lost over two generations it might be lost for good. I believe that to be true and like it or not we live in a post Christian society.

In today's culture I wonder if memory is still considered to be important or has the ease of the visual by way of photograph or the family video for example, meant that reliance on memory is less important and is a neglected force. Human beings can forget very easily and yet the recalling of events and special times will remain important. So it is with the story of God. If the story has indeed been lost and the essential truths forgotten [other than seasons like Christmas *and Santa*, Easter *and the egg*] then the story has to be retold and relived.

Storytellers are needed who will remind the listeners of the drama of God's love for his created order. The need to hear this almost too good to be true story becomes increasingly important in a post modern world where the meta narrative is seen as irrelevant and where personal stories reign supreme, and where the big scene is demoted in favour of small episodes. William Bausch in his book. 'Storytelling -Imagination and Faith' suggests that the story of God, as we have it in scripture, contains all the ingredients of a great story viz love, hate, tragedy, betrayal, battles, romance, beauty, heartache, triumph, enigma, mystery and wonder. Down the trail of history some clever folk sat down and contemplated the story and, after discussion and thought, brought some creeds into being. Later on some other thinkers and intellectuals reflected on both the story and the creed and Systematic Theology resulted. This may be great for intellectual or philosophical discussion and debate but it may also have removed the 'guts' and the rawness from the story, the very ingredients which touch base with ordinary people. Regrettably for some, systematic theology is however not the norm of ordinary life and it can act as a block, preventing people from tuning in and identifying with the Bible.

Stories have been told to provide entertainment, education, the retelling of history and the sharing of information. In primary cultures storytelling holds a revered place. Sitting in a circle and listening to a native American telling the story of the tribe and using words which paint colourful pictures in the mind is a good example. To be a person is to have a story and without that story the person lacks identity. The story of each person is rarely a four lane motorway but is frequently a winding track up a steep mountain which zig zags and backtracks, telling of struggle, miracles, heartaches and change.

Telling a story to a group or another person or with friends or family is totally different to reading a book. The storytelling process has its own dynamics for it is fun, enjoyable, engaging and often spontaneous. It can be a powerful element in the building of community. Does the separation from or a lack of story contribute towards feelings of lostness and isolation ? Those who are the storytellers become friends and those who know one another's stories are bound together in unique and special ways. It is the depth of the story's meaning which shapes relationships when stories are told and shared. Storytelling is also highly emotional creating laughter or tears and a feeling which demands that the end of the story is known.

Which are the stories we remember from the past ? Who told them and where and when and how ?

A brief reflection on the stories heard in childhood will serve as a reminder of their contribution to our growth and development. If we are to use story as a tool and resource we need to understand how contemporary stories are told and passed on in today's culture and context. Youth workers need to gain the skills that will give young people the space not only to tell their stories but to be heard and listened to as well.

The greatest challenge to Christian youth workers is to discover methods and approaches which enable young people to make life changing connections between their story and the story of Jesus. These connections have to be made within the rough and tumble of ordinary everyday life. Frequently it is the 'issues' that help make those connections - the issues facing young people today and the issues in the Bible story.

Some of the principles, modelled so well by Jesus the master storyteller, give some clues about story;

He used **different** techniques e.g.

short sayings	prophets not honoured in their own countries
rhythm and poetry	ask and you will receive; knock and it shall be opened
repetition	happy are you when; happy are you
humour	Pharisees swallowing a camel
exaggeration	unless you hate your father and mother

He used his **context** e.g.

he used what his listeners could see	sheep, coins, children, harvest
he used visual aids	children, show me a coin
his actions were object lessons	washing feet, welcoming children/lepers

He **involved** people;

he spoke in familiar terms	new wine in old bottles
he told stories	there was once
he expected a response	which one was neighbour ?
he connected with listener's feelings	If you then being.....
he met needs	the woman at the well
he caused people to think	if you have ears to hear

The stories of scripture have meaning and significance which make them special. In the retelling of them God can again become present, alive and active. The early Christians, as they told and retold the stories, found they were making connections with their own lives. The stories were written to be told rather than read, and always in the context of the gathered community not in privatised isolation. The stories have to be told and read with heart and mind and imagination fully engaged. The Bible is rich in metaphors and stories appeal naturally to hearts and minds, though it must be remembered that the Bible is not a newspaper but a book. - a book which contains the story of God. The story must however reach people on a level which they can understand and respond to, yet at the same time pull them beyond where they are now..

implications and outcomes

These are exciting days for the people of God. The opportunities are limitless. The needs are huge. The challenges demand a degree of openness and risk taking not seen in the church for years. Growing up is a generation of younger Christians who are not lumbered with the cultural baggage of the past 100 years, who are less inclined to talk and more committed to 'doing' and action.

Graham Cray puts it this way;

'Through the wide gap between the two circles [one representing conservative evangelicalism which has failed to distinguish the form of Christianity within a passing cultural context, from the biblical faith itself and the other representing post evangelicals] pour a whole generation of young Christians, who have never been aware of any culture other than a post modern one. They are not a hinge generation, for they have no internal tension between the culture in which they were raised and the culture they now live in. They are not dualist but they are passionately committed to wholistic mission. If anything their commitment to explicit evangelism is stronger than that of their predecessors; but it is integrated with an equal commitment to justice, healing and the care of the poor and the planet. They are mostly charismatic but have a strong commitment to scripture. They are effectively winning their friends for Christ but find it increasingly difficult to integrate them into more traditional churches; so, with or without authority, they begin congregations of their own. This is the generation who will shape the church for the post modern world'

There are no neat and off the cuff answers to these challenges and issues. Quick fixes will not suffice and what works in one place may not work in the next. Some youth groups and churches may go to the wall but from the stumps will arise new shoots and new expressions which may or may not be long lasting. All of these, and other issues, which cause the people of God to tremble and fear, to divide, disagree or come together, to discuss or to act, to re invent the wheel or to sell out to culture are almost irrelevant. This is God's church and he has his plans and purposes to enable it to play its part in his mission in his world. How he uses the church, and his people and how he bestows the gifts, ministries and empowerment of the Holy Spirit is not up for debate or discussion. What is on the line is the reality of the commitment of the people of God to his calling to an involvement in his mission. Demonstrating and making real his kingdom of love, justice, shalom and wholeness will mean as much, if not more involvement, outside the church than inside. It will be inclusive in its worship and celebration, in its service and servant hood. It will be a costly, demanding but intensely 'joy giving' experience which mirrors the wonder of the incarnation when God became social in the person of his son. When and how such activity becomes the norm or when renewal, revival or refreshment comes is solely the prerogative of God - but the blessing and the outcome will be for the well being and enrichment of all.

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