

# **Breaking through into Dynamic Ways of Being Church\***

by  
**John Drane & Olive M Fleming Drane**

## **Introduction**

Lest it be lost in the discussion that follows, we want to make one very important statement right at the outset of this chapter. That is, that we all owe a great debt to those who have preceded us in the community of faith which is the Christian church. Over the past two hundred years in particular, Christians in Scotland have faithfully borne witness to the Gospel in the midst of many complex and challenging circumstances. A hundred years ago, the very possibility of religious belief seemed to hang in the balance, caught between the rock of philosophical rationalism and the hard place of scientific optimism. By the middle of the twentieth century, the voices of social scientists were adding their own bleak predictions, with the assumption that the progress of secularization was unstoppable, and would soon ensure the total extermination of religious belief not only from Western culture, but from the globalized culture which was then only just beginning to emerge.<sup>1</sup> Given all that (and these were by no means the only anti-Christian trends in the wider culture), it is something of a miracle that the church has survived at all, and we owe that to the insight and sheer hard work of generations of believers who went before us. That is not to say that they did not, of course, make some mistakes, nor to imply that, with the benefit of hindsight, it is not possible to see how in some respects they may even have contributed to the decline that the churches have suffered in more recent times. But overall, they were people of integrity who struggled to contextualize the Gospel effectively in the world of which they were a part. In the process, they got many things right, and some things wrong, which is perhaps about as much as any of us can ever hope for. If we are to make progress in our generation it will not be by sniping at what is past, but by looking to the future and recognizing that we too are limited in our perspectives.

## **Past, Present and Future**

None of us can see beyond the immediate present, but there is no doubt that the future will be radically different from the past. Our grandparents were born towards the end of the nineteenth century, and just over a hundred years later we ourselves became grandparents. The world into which our grand-daughter has been born - let alone the world in which she will live out the rest of her life - is radically different from the world of our grandparents. People of their generation did of course witness many remarkable changes in lifestyles and attitudes, but at the end of their lives the world was still fundamentally the same as it had been at the time of their birth. Admittedly, the British empire had disappeared, and with it much of the triumphant optimism of

---

\* An article written for the 1<sup>st</sup> Ecumenical Assembly of Scottish churches, held in 2001, and published in *Breaking New Ground* (Edinburgh: ACTS 2001), 139-154.

<sup>1</sup> For a recent analysis of the spiritual state of Britain in the light of the secularization thesis, see Steve Bruce, *Religion in Modern Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1995). A different account, questioning the secularization thesis, is in Grace Davie, *Religion in Britain since 1945* (Oxford: Blackwell 1994).

the Victorian era, but the map of the world had not been so radically redrawn as it was in the final decade of the twentieth century. Domestic life had become progressively easier, but mostly through the mechanization of operations that they would already have been familiar with from their childhood. Health and life expectancy had undergone radical changes for the better, which is why our grandparents lived to more than twice the age that might have been predicted at the time they were born. But none of us can live now the way our grandparents did. Today, we transport ourselves with greater speed and efficiency than at any previous time in the whole of history, and that affects the sort of places we live and the ways in which we are able to work. For many people, it is becoming increasingly unnecessary to travel between home and work at all on a regular basis, because so much work can now be done remotely, as it were. Using our computers, we communicate with people on the other side of the world on a daily basis, and think nothing of it. Today as we write this, we have already exchanged instant messages with friends in Australia, Singapore, Africa, and several parts of the USA, as well as the UK, and tomorrow we will repeat the process, quite possibly with even more varied destinations. In the last five years we have been literally round the world four times, with many shorter trips in between. Throughout their entire lives, our grandparents scarcely left the town in which they were raised, and their most significant journeys were undertaken by our grandfathers during service in the army. The way we use our leisure time has undergone a similar transformation. Indeed, our grandparents would probably not have known what 'leisure' was in the sense we think of it today. They certainly would have found our ways of relating to one another quite different from anything they ever experienced. The idea that either of us would be writing a chapter for a book on the church would have been unimaginable, and writing it together would be beyond anything they could comprehend - either in terms of how it might be done, or why we would wish to undertake such a thing. Social class was a key factor that both limited their lives and offered them such opportunities as they enjoyed. Though Britain is still a class-conscious society when compared with some other countries, our expectations of what is possible for all our citizens have been significantly redefined in recent years. Moreover, the shape and structure of our families has all but completely changed in the last twenty years, and definitions of what a family is, and how someone might join a family, continue to evolve.<sup>2</sup>

The church seems to be one of the few areas of life where little has changed. If there is one place where our grandparents might still feel at home, this would perhaps be it. For the most part, our expressions of what it means to be church are merely variations on what was happening a hundred years ago. We still gather in the same way, in some cases even sitting on the same seats. In most churches, we still expect that worship is essentially something for trained clergy to 'conduct', and participation by the worshippers is restricted to the singing of hymns and maybe the occasional 'Amen' at the end of a prayer. Even when changes have been introduced, the vast majority of them are of an essentially cosmetic character. We wear more relaxed styles of clothing, sing some different hymns, play guitars and drums as well as organs, read

---

<sup>2</sup> For a succinct account of the changes, see Diana Gittins, *The Family in Question* (London: Macmillan 1993, 2nd ed); and for a Christian perspective, John Drane & Olive M Fleming Drane, *Happy Families?* (London: HarperCollins 1995); Herbert Anderson, Don Browning, et al, *The Family Handbook* (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox Press 1998).

less of the Bible from more recent translations, use overhead projectors, listen to much shorter sermons, and expect liturgies to be in contemporary English rather than in Latin or the language of Shakespeare. But these are all minor adjustments when compared to other aspects of contemporary church life, and here the reality is that all the most significant changes have not come about by our own choice, but have been forced upon us by what has been happening in the wider culture. Our grandparents would be surprised at how few people now attend church on an average Sunday, not to mention the way in which the numbers of those with any living connection with the church has declined seriously as a proportion of the overall population. They would find it odd that 'regular' attendance could be defined in terms of those who are there once a month, that most church members and attenders are now women (though, paradoxically, most church leaders are still men), that organized worship is now mostly restricted to a single event that takes place for an hour or so on Sunday mornings, and that Sunday Schools have all but disappeared - not because they have been replaced by other catechetical opportunities for children and young people, but because so many churches have few, if any, people under the age of fifty or so. These facts are all well known, and have been well enough documented elsewhere for it to be unnecessary to include more of them here.<sup>3</sup> We are now called upon to wrestle with the reality of what they represent. For the last forty years, the statistics have reflected an accelerating crisis in church life, and we are now faced with the serious possibility - likelihood, even - that the Christian faith might disappear entirely from our culture within the first half of this century. That certainly seems to be the scenario to which the figures point. Even a more optimistic prognosis suggests that, unless there are some quite fundamental changes, the church's presence will be limited to a decreasing number of urban worship centres, with large parts of the country - including urban as well as rural neighbourhoods - effectively de-churched. If that sounds like a dire prediction, then we should remember the lesson of north Africa, which in the early centuries of the Christian era was home to some of the most significant theologians and churches of the whole of Christian history, and is now totally bereft of any significant Christian presence. Our churches are in incredibly bad shape. Moreover, the decline is affecting all Christian traditions. Every denomination faces the same issues, and they extend right across the theological spectrum.

### **Optimism and Pessimism**

We often wonder why we are still in the church. After all, most of our peers left it long ago - not only those who went to the same schools as we did, but also those with whom John trained for ministry. Very many of them are not only out of ministry but have given up altogether on Christian belief. Quite possibly, a significant number of those reading this in preparation for the Scottish Ecumenical Assembly will be feeling exactly the same way. Three years ago John conducted a survey on attitudes to evangelism among the Scottish churches, the findings of which were subsequently presented to the ACTS Commission on Mission, Evangelism, and Education. Though it is difficult to quantify, a common thread running through many of the responses was the feeling that a lot of churches contain a lot of discouraged and frustrated people. There was a fair amount of anecdotal evidence to suggest that one reason why

---

<sup>3</sup> For convenient summaries of recent statistical trends, see Peter Brierley *Religious Trends 2000/2001* (London: Christian Research 2000).

Christians are apparently reticent to invite others to share their faith is because they are despairing of its effectiveness themselves. One of the most obvious ways in which this impinges on the lives of so many is the apparent inability of all our churches to nurture their own children from infancy through to a mature adult expression of Christian faith. This is actually one of the biggest challenges we face. It is of course true that many young people in Scotland today have no idea what the Gospel, or the church, is about. But when the children of church members opt out of active involvement in the life of the Christian community, we cannot claim that they are doing so out of misguided ignorance. Those who have been brought up in the church leave, not because they don't understand, but precisely because they do - and what they find in church life lacks the power to speak to them in any meaningful way. Put simply, many of those people who have stayed with the church into mid-life are now having to face the uncomfortable fact that it seems as if it hasn't worked for their own families - so how can they with integrity invite others to become a part of it? When you place these facts alongside the statistics of church decline, they raise some far-reaching questions, for it appears that - even at this late stage - if we were able to nurture our own children effectively, the numerical decline of our churches would be halted overnight, and might even be turned into growth.

There is no denying that words like crisis are entirely justified to describe the circumstances in which we now find ourselves, and no useful purpose will be served by trying to redefine that in some way that might appear to be less challenging. This is why we make no apology for calling us here to a realistic appraisal of the struggle that we face. But it is also important for us to sound a note of optimism. To varying degrees, both of us have a broadly optimistic outlook about most things in life. Our individual temperaments are well suited, and predispose us to tend to look on the bright side and to expect good outcomes rather than bad. But there is more reason than that for being an optimist so far as the church is concerned. At the risk of being labelled naive or pietistic by some of you, we are going to say that we think the church has a future because it is rooted in God. Though the church is, of course, a social organization, that is not all that we are called to be. It is not even our primary calling, for as the people of God our life and witness needs to have a transcendent dimension to it. Any discussion about the church and its future will always run the risk of spending too much time talking about ourselves, and too little reflecting on the mystery that is God. Could it be that, up to this point, we have put rather too much faith in ourselves and too little trust in the grace of God?

Another reason for optimism, not unconnected with that, is the way in which the church has grown exponentially in the non-western world in recent decades. Today, almost 70% of the world's Christians are non-white, non-western people.<sup>4</sup> There are many complexities involved in understanding what is going on in this shift of the church's centre of gravity away from the West, but at the very least it must make available to us a vast wealth of insight and experience that should both inspire and inform us in our own concern to re-evangelize Scotland. For this is really what our agenda will have to be: how can we transform ourselves from being churches for those who are already members, into churches that will have mission at their heart?

---

<sup>4</sup> David B Barrett, George T Kurian, & Todd M Johnson (eds), *World Christian Encyclopedia: a Comparative Survey of Churches and Religions in the Modern World* (New York: Oxford University Press 2001, 2nd ed. in 2 volumes).

One of the other encouraging features of our day is that increasing numbers of us are asking that question. In recent years, most of our denominations have launched their own programmes and training schemes to try and do something about effecting that change, though from what we can see such progress as we have made has been fragmented and half-hearted. At denominational level, none of our churches has really succeeded in making the paradigm shift from maintenance to mission. But that does not mean we have not changed. Whether we recognize it or not, the church is changing already, not always in positive and life-giving ways. We cannot insulate ourselves from the huge social changes that are going on all around us, and the real question is not, 'Will our churches change?' but 'What kind of change will affect our churches?' More precisely, will we sit back and allow ourselves to be changed by whatever might be happening in the wider culture, or are we prepared to take the initiative to become ourselves the divinely empowered agents for change that will truly make a difference, not only in our own lives but in the life of the world more widely? This debate is not about being trendy, nor is it really about being relevant. It is about being incarnational.

### **Modernity, Postmodernity, and Cultural Change**

What then might be involved in contextualizing the Gospel in the emerging postmodern culture? At the conclusion of his book *The Death of Christian Britain*, social historian Callum Brown makes this statement: '...the culture of Christianity has gone in the Britain of the new millennium. Britain is showing the world how religion as we have known it can die.'<sup>5</sup> If by 'religion' we mean (as he does) 'religious institutions' - in particular the churches - then few of us could plausibly disagree with his claim, even if we might want to question some of the reasons that he advances to explain it.<sup>6</sup> Paradoxically, however, there is a growing consensus among social commentators that, at the same time as we are becoming less 'religious', we are also increasingly 'spiritual'.<sup>7</sup> In their book *The Experience Economy*, business strategists Joseph Pine and James Gilmour suggest that we are now leaving the visual culture behind and entering into what they call an 'immersive' culture - 'the experience economy' - in which the businesses that succeed will be the ones that can market experiences that change people's lives, 'experiences to learn and grow, develop and improve, mend and reform ... [such] transformations turn aspirants into a "new you", with all the ethical, philosophical, and religious implications that phrase implies'. In the process of explaining how they see this working, they go on to observe that 'We see people seeking spiritual growth outside the bounds of their local, traditional place of worship', which is why 'the rise of spiritual directors' can now be regarded as a business opportunity.<sup>8</sup> At first glance, this might seem like a profoundly unChristian

---

<sup>5</sup> Callum Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain* (London: Routledge 2001), 198.

<sup>6</sup> For a corrective, from a world perspective, see Peter Berger (ed), *The Desecularization of the World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1999).

<sup>7</sup> For an account of this geared to the American situation, but not wholly irrelevant to Britain, see Wade Clark Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1999); and on the spirituality of young people, Tom Beaudoin, *Virtual Faith: the irreverent spiritual quest of Generation X* (San Francisco: Jossey Bass 1998).

<sup>8</sup> B Joseph Pine & James H Gilmore, *The Experience Economy* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press 1999). The quotations here are all from chapter 9 (163-164, 183). This is by no means the only management text to use Biblical concepts in this way: cf also Laurie Beth Jones, *Jesus CEO: using*

vision, until we realize that one of their key models for all this is Jesus<sup>9</sup> and they conclude their book with a quotation from Ephesians 2:8, and the insistence that by taking people and their needs seriously the world of business will itself undergo transformation ‘because perfecting people falls under the province of God ... rather than in the domain of human business.’<sup>10</sup> Though we would not want to press the analogy between marketing and the Gospel too far, when we came across this book our instinctive reaction was to think, ‘But isn’t the church already supposed to be in the “business” that offers personal transformation?’ Except, the painful truth is that the majority of people just don’t see us that way. This is the dilemma of being church in an age of postmodernity, eloquently summed up by two interviewees in a survey of young adults and their spirituality published as long ago as 1994. Lisa Baker, a woman aged 20, told the interviewer that ‘I honestly tried the churches, but they just couldn’t speak to me ...’ while Alan Bosworth (age 23) summed up his experience by saying, ‘Sure, I believe in God, but I don’t know what churches have to do with knowing God. It’s for another time, another mindset.’<sup>11</sup> The same sentiments are widespread among the people of Scotland today, and not just young people. Most people are not against the church in any significant way. In fact, they rather admire and respect the valuable contributions that we have made over many generations to the life of the nation. They see us as good people, maybe even making a real difference in the world - and yet disconnected from the things that most concern them. They frequently express a sad and sincere regret that, for whatever reason, the church no longer seems to ‘work’ for people today in the way it apparently did for their grandparents.<sup>12</sup>

## Practical Challenges

Much has been written and said about the nature of the postmodern culture in which we now find ourselves. We do not propose to add here to the philosophical and sociological definitions of it.<sup>13</sup> Anyone who wants to know what we think can easily find it in other books,<sup>14</sup> and it is in any case subject to many different opinions. But when all the dust has settled on the arguments about what postmodernity means, we are left with three practical elements that have a direct bearing on how we might now need to redefine the church, and find new ways forward that will be both rooted in the past as well as incarnated in the present and future.

---

*ancient wisdom for visionary leadership* (New York: Hyperion 1995).

<sup>9</sup> *The Experience Economy*, 182-183.

<sup>10</sup> *The Experience Economy*, 206.

<sup>11</sup> George Barna, *Baby Busters* (Chicago: Northfield 1994), 93, 143-144.

<sup>12</sup> For a succinct account of all this, see Paul Vallely, ‘Evangelism in a Post-Religious Society’, in *Setting the Agenda: the Report of the 1999 Church of England Conference on Evangelism* (London: Church House Publishing 1999), 30-43.

<sup>13</sup> For useful treatments of postmodernity in relation to theology and church life, see David Lyon, *Postmodernity* (Buckingham: Open University Press 1994); David S Dockery, *The Challenge of Postmodernism* (Wheaton IL: Bridgepoint 1995); and for a penetrating critique of the dominant Western understanding of postmodernity as a liberating philosophy, Ziauddin Sardar, *Postmodernism and the Other* (London: Pluto Press 1998).

<sup>14</sup> John Drane & Olive M Fleming Drane, *Happy Families?* (London: HarperCollins 1995); John Drane, *Cultural Change and Biblical Faith* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press 2000); *The McDonaldization of the Church* (London: Darton Longman and Todd 2000); Olive M Fleming Drane, *Clowns, Storytellers and Disciples* (Oxford: BRF, forthcoming).

***We know that things aren't working any more*** We have already drawn attention to the obvious differences between today's lifestyles and those of our grandparents. Actually, virtually nothing is exactly the same, even in everyday processes such as the way we heat our homes, wash our clothes, or prepare our food. But there are bigger changes than that, for the underlying securities of past generations have also gone. John's father worked in the electricity industry, and when he was a child he remembers him boasting to friends that nuclear energy would bring an enormous beneficial transformation to all our lives. Who would believe that today? The science and technology that once promised so much has not only failed to deliver what was hoped for, but in many instances has actually produced the opposite of that better world to which we aspire. The twentieth century was a time when we discovered the dark side of science, and realized that making a better world involves a lot more than just getting the technology right: it was the technology that made possible the mass slaughter of the First World War, of the Nazi Holocaust, the devastation of the environment, and much more besides. While no-one would wish to turn the clock back, even if it were possible, the same kind of love-hate relationship can be discerned in people's feelings about many other areas of life today, including especially institutions of all kinds (not just the churches). Whether we like it or not, we have to face realistically the fact that church life as we know it has come to be labelled as one of those things that no longer work. Taking a broader historical perspective, we can see that what has happened here was just the final nail in the coffin of that whole way of being that, in a religious setting, came to be known as 'Christendom'. The idea that there can ever be one all-embracing story that will give universal meaning to all things has been seriously undermined, if not extinguished for ever.<sup>15</sup>

What does all this have to do with ways of being church? In the past, because the church believed it was the repository of the only plausible 'big story' or metanarrative, our forebears were able to assume not only that they spoke on behalf of everyone, but that they had an unassailable right to speak *to* everyone. In some way or another, we were all 'Christian', because that was perceived as the only worldview that made sense of things. Some aspects of that understanding still persist, albeit in a highly attenuated and residual form, most obviously perhaps in the kind of implicit religion of those who still wish the church to be involved in their rites of passage, but who have no further interest in a living connection with the faith.<sup>16</sup> It also persists in some church circles.<sup>17</sup> Just recently, we came across a group of churches (in Scotland) that decided to address the problem of a long-term decline in membership and attendance by offering the population of its area what was described as an 'amnesty' on church membership, whereby people who had allowed their membership to 'lapse' could

---

<sup>15</sup> Most famously expressed by Jean-François Lyotard, who defined postmodernity at its simplest as 'incredulity toward metanarratives', *The Postmodern Condition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1993), xxiv.

<sup>16</sup> On implicit religion more generally, see Edward I Bailey, *Implicit Religion: an Introduction* (London: Middlesex University Press 1998).

<sup>17</sup> Much as we would like to agree with William Storrar's belief that the church 'married modernity ... [only] for the best of missiological reasons', there is just a bit too much evidence that seems to suggest that some church people have gone well beyond that, and actually enjoy the status and perceived social standing that embracing Christendom-style attitudes to culture gives them. Cf W F Storrar, 'From Braveheart to Faint-heart: worship and culture in postmodern Scotland', in B D Spinks & I R Torrance (eds), *To Glorify God: Essays on Modern Reformed Liturgy* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark 1999), 78; and John Drane, *Cultural Change and Biblical Faith*, 112-116.

return on a no-questions-asked sort of basis. Such an offer would only make sense on the assumption that Christendom is still alive and well, that the church has a right to expect loyalty from the wider population, and that if we Christians can no longer engage effectively with other people, that is not our problem, but theirs. For reasons that are hard to understand, our Scottish churches seem more prone to this attitude than those in other parts of the UK.

***We have a greater awareness of more of the world*** Because of increased opportunities for travel, and also because the world now travels into our own homes through the medium of TV, we are much more aware of people who are different from ourselves. Whereas our grandparents might have assumed that being like them was the best way to be, and that other ways of doing things were to one degree or another 'not civilized', we can now see that things are nothing like so simple. It is perfectly possible to be a whole, fulfilled person without being 'like us'. Most of the world's people, at all times and in all places, have not been white Westerners!

In church terms, we have also become more conscious of the possibility of different ways of being church - some of which appear to be more appropriate for today's world than the ways we have inherited from our own past. The most striking example of this has to be the rapid rise of the Pentecostal movement. A hundred years ago, Pentecostal Christianity was all but non-existent: today, it is the second largest Christian grouping in the world, after the Roman Catholic tradition, and very much larger than either the Orthodox or Protestant traditions.<sup>18</sup> If we include the considerable numbers of people within mainline denominations worldwide who would identify themselves as 'charismatic' (as distinct from those who belong to the traditional Pentecostal denominations), the growth of this distinctive way of being church is even more dramatic still. Whether we realize it or not, we have all in one way or another been affected by this movement, if only through the many new hymns that have emerged from that tradition and which are used and enjoyed more widely - not to mention a phenomenon such as the Alpha course, which began at Holy Trinity Brompton, a charismatic Church of England congregation, and has been warmly endorsed by churches of many different outlooks. Whatever you think of it - and Alpha has its detractors as well as its enthusiasts - there is no getting away from the fact that its entire underlying philosophy is informed by a charismatic perspective. Nor can we ignore the fact that the extraordinary growth of independent charismatic churches in Britain (the New Churches) has been the one bright spot in an otherwise gloomy statistical picture over the last twenty years or so.

Yet in spite of our increasing knowledge of the wider world, and our claims to greater openness and inclusiveness, we still easily fall prey to the kind of sectarianism that bedevilled Scottish culture in past generations. Old habits die hard, and though much progress has been made, the traditional Protestant/Catholic suspicion still survives among churches today, fuelled by prejudice from both sides. More surprisingly, perhaps, is the way that a similar kind of bigotry surfaces from time to time in ecumenical circles, especially on the part of some in the mainstream establishment

---

<sup>18</sup> According to Walter J Hollenweger, *Pentecostalism: Origins and Developments Worldwide* (Peabody MA: Hendrickson 1997), 1, the rapid expansion of Pentecostalism represents 'a growth which is unique in church history, not excluding the early centuries of the church'. For more on the phenomenon, see also Murray W Dempster, Byron D Klaus, & Douglas Petersen (eds), *The Globalization of Pentecostalism* (Oxford: Regnum 1999).



who speak disparagingly of others as ‘fundamentalists’. When this label is applied to Pentecostals and charismatics it merely reveals the ignorance of those who use it, for whatever else they might be they emphatically cannot ever be ‘fundamentalists’, at least not if that term is used in its classic meaning to describe people whose sole authority is a particular understanding of the Bible. One fact alone shows that Pentecostals are hardly fundamentalists in this sense, namely that over 50% of all the women who have ever been ordained in the entire history of the church have been in Pentecostal denominations, compared with only 17% in the major Protestant churches.<sup>19</sup> In addition, though, by definition it is impossible to place so much emphasis on personally-received spiritual experience and be a fundamentalist. Actually, what is going on in Pentecostal theology in relation to authority and revelation is far closer to the conciliar tradition than it is even to classic Protestantism. Neither of us would describe ourselves as either a Pentecostal or a fundamentalist - nor have we ever been - but we mention this matter here because we think it is another key area in which we need to re-examine what it means to be church in Scotland today, not least in an ecumenical context. Though we both have a fairly deep distrust of all labels, and frequently resist other people’s efforts to pigeonhole us in that way, we cannot deny that we do actually belong to that liberal consensus which has dominated Scottish church life for so long. But, in different ways, we have come to realize in recent years that if our openness only extends to others who happen to be like us, then we are just kidding ourselves if we imagine that we are inclusive, or that we are reflecting the intrinsic values of the Gospel. Jesus included many strange people among his disciples, including one who would betray him and several who challenged him. Could it be that our churches are so unappealing to so many, not because of anything to do with the Gospel, but because we have become so bland - a way of being church that appeals to people like us, but which fails to speak to others who are different? Do we perhaps talk the language of inclusiveness, while all the time only engaging with other people who are like ourselves?<sup>20</sup> We can explore this further by moving on to the third practical consequence of postmodernity, which is ***We are searching for more ‘spiritual’ answers*** We could spend a lot of time debating what people today mean by ‘spiritual’ - and some Christians do. But there can be no doubt what it is that people are reacting against. In the words of sociologist

---

<sup>19</sup> See Barbara Brown Zikmund, 'Women and Ordination', in Rosemary Radford Ruether & Rosemary Skinner Keller (eds), *In Our Own Voices: Four Centuries of American Women's Religious Writing* (San Francisco: HarperCollins 1995), 299.

<sup>20</sup> We realize that this may sound like a counsel of perfection, and that of course a dialogue needs to take place in two directions. In the Scottish context, Christian groups that have not previously operated in the context of formal ecumenical structures are likely to be somewhat wary of our intentions, often for good reasons. However, there is a very obvious contrast here between Scottish attitudes and those which prevail in England, where strenuous efforts have been made to be more inclusive, and have in some instances led to an infusion of new life and energy into ecumenical life, not least through the involvement of leaders from the New Churches. In some respects this was probably made easier by the existence of strong black-led churches in England, which presented a particular moral challenge to the mainline denominations, for they only came into existence as a consequence of the racism of English churches in the 1950s and 1960s. Nonetheless, despite the different cultural baggage, we remain convinced that similar overtures to such groups in Scotland could make a real difference to the overall energy levels of Scottish Christianity, and would make a much more significant contribution to the re-evangelization of Scotland than moves towards organic union of a limited number of churches, which we regard as an agenda for the past rather than for the future.

George Ritzer, 'Human beings, equipped with a wide array of skills and abilities, are asked to perform a limited number of highly simplified tasks over and over. Instead of expressing their human abilities ... people are forced to deny their humanity and act in a robot-like manner. People do not express themselves ... but rather deny themselves.'<sup>21</sup> Transposing that into more overtly Christian language, we might say that, as people made in God's image, we are not machines but are infinitely complex individuals, of greater potential than we ever imagined. Western people as a whole are searching for new expressions of what it means to be truly human, of connecting with the Creator in ways that will not only be life-giving for ourselves, but that will empower us to make our own distinctive contribution to the well-being of the world at large, because that is a primary purpose of life. There are many things that might prevent us from achieving those aspirations, but the underlying theme is the sense of struggle and personal alienation that, in different ways, we are all wrestling with as we try to work out new ways of being in this postmodern cultural matrix.

In *The McDonaldization of the Church*, John proposed that, in missiological terms, we can identify seven people groups to whom the church must relate effectively: the desperate poor, hedonists, spiritual searchers, traditionalists, secularists, corporate achievers, and the apathetic.<sup>22</sup> This understanding has been widely acclaimed, and more than one reviewer has agreed with the opinion that this is 'a compelling analysis of the social and cultural groups the Churches need to reach if they are to reverse their current alarming decline',<sup>23</sup> which is why we introduce it here with a degree of confidence that it will be helpful as we face the task ahead. Given the fragmented nature of today's culture, a 'one size fits all' approach to church life will not be truly incarnational - if it ever was. At its best, it might be incarnational for one or two sectors of the population, and that is what we believe has happened. It is not that the Gospel has been rejected, but rather that it is not being heard because we know how to be church only for limited people groups in today's Scotland. There is nothing wrong with those people groups for whom the churches we now have are meaningful, which in turn implies that the solution to our predicament will not come through dismantling the church and starting afresh. Whatever their faults, the churches we have do clearly meet the spiritual needs of at least *some* people, otherwise no-one at all would be in them. But the kind of people they connect with - on this analysis, predominantly traditionalists, corporate achievers and the apathetic, to varying degrees - are the declining groups in the population, not the growing groups. What would churches for the desperate poor, or the hedonists, or the spiritual searchers look like?

## Looking Forward

At last, some of you will be thinking, we are going to get some definitive statement on what 'dynamic ways of being church' might look like. In reality, though, there is unlikely to be any one simple answer to that question. For those who attend the Scottish Ecumenical Assembly in person, our contributions to the seminars and workshops clustered around this theme will offer an opportunity to explore all that in ways that will undoubtedly be more practically oriented towards finding an answer to that key question 'how do we get from here to there?'

---

<sup>21</sup> George Ritzer, *The McDonaldization of Society* (Thousand Oaks CA: Pine Forge Press 1993), 26.

<sup>22</sup> *The McDonaldization of the Church*, 55-84.

<sup>23</sup> John Wolffe, in *Church Times* 9 March 2001, 16.

Rather than go down that route here, this chapter has stuck resolutely to more broadly based issues because we are convinced that we actually need to work out the answers for ourselves in relation to local circumstances. The days of what John has called the McDonaldized church are over, and if we really believe the first page of the Bible, and celebrate the fact that we are all, in our amazing diversity, people made in God's image, then that should be cause for rejoicing, not for regret. In the oft-repeated words of one of the church's most ancient liturgies, we say that worship ought to be 'for all people, at all times and in all places'. As it is, the formal worship of most of our churches is accessible only to some of the people, at very limited times and in sometimes inhospitable places. If we are to break through into dynamic ways of being church, we will need to revisit not only our understandings of what constitutes 'real' worship, but also matters connected with times and places - and to do that with integrity will in turn require us to tackle issues of power, control, money, and ultimately, theology. So what signposts would we set up as a guide to the future? In proposing a list here, we are not claiming that it is comprehensive, only that it might serve as a starting point for further discussion - and action.

First of all, it seems clear to us that we need to reaffirm the church as a locus of mystery, a place where God is at the centre. We do not mean to imply that God is not present everywhere (if it were not for the wider *Missio Dei* this entire debate would be pointless), but it is our shared conviction that, in the intellectual climate of rationalist-materialist thinking that has dominated the last few centuries of Western culture, we have somehow lost sight of the transcendent dimensions of Christian faith. The appropriate balance between beliefs and experience has been disturbed, in such a way that we have elevated theology (understood in a static way as an abstract set of rational propositions) at the expense of discipleship. In reality, you cannot have the former without the latter. Theology in its most pristine form starts with discipleship. The primary aspect of being Christian is that we are called to follow Jesus, and theology is what emerges as we reflect on the meaning of the experience. The earliest disciples appear to have followed (and, therefore, to have been 'real' disciples) long before they had any 'beliefs' about Christology, salvation, the sacraments, or indeed any of the other things we imagine to be so central to being Christian (Mark 1:16-20).<sup>24</sup> Moreover, the same pattern was repeated in the life of the earliest church's greatest theologian, St Paul, whose meeting with the risen Christ on the Damascus road was the source and inspiration for even his most abstract thinking, as he unpacked the significance of what had come to him first and foremost as a transcendent experience of the risen Christ.<sup>25</sup> It was understandable that, in the endeavour to make Christian belief more rationally accessible, our forebears should have emphasized the cognitive aspects of faith, but to be truly incarnational in today's world we ought now to be reaffirming the mysterious and transcendent aspects. Leith Anderson captures the mood of the moment when he comments that, 'The old paradigm taught that if you have the right teaching, you will experience God. The new paradigm says that if you experience God, you will have the right teaching.'<sup>26</sup> This is one of the points where the concerns of postmodern spiritual searchers invite

---

<sup>24</sup> Cf John Drane, *Faith in a Changing Culture* (London: HarperCollins 1997), 218-223; Richard V Peace, *Conversion in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1999).

<sup>25</sup> See Seyoon Kim, *The Origin of Paul's Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1984).

<sup>26</sup> Leith Anderson, *A Church for the Twenty-First Century* (Minneapolis: Bethany House 1992), 21.

us to revisit our own roots in the New Testament, and we will miss something of vital significance if we fail to do so.

A second concern that we would identify is for us to rediscover how the church can be a place of community, nurture, and personal growth. This also invites us to go back to our roots, while relating to one of the key concerns of contemporary culture. In a fragmented society, people are looking for a place to belong, a place of safety, a place where we can be empowered rather than stifled, and a place where we can be open with others, acknowledging our needs and inadequacies with an expectation of support rather than a fear of condemnation, and finding acceptance for who we are rather than having to conform to images of who other people think we should be. This might be more challenging, because it will inevitably require us to value one another as persons made in God's image, regardless of class, gender, ethnicity, and other characteristics that may appear to divide us. This seems to be a particularly difficult area for the church, for as Walter Wink has eloquently reminded us, 'the vast majority of people in churches are not there to be changed but to shore themselves up against the too-rapid changes of a souped-up society.'<sup>27</sup> Nevertheless, it seems to us that part of being empowered for effective mission will also be the recognition that the struggle to be human, spiritual and Christian is part of life's journey, and we do not need to have our own lives in order before we can effectively witness to others. There has often been an unspoken expectation that Christian people should somehow be 'perfect', exemplified most obviously in the sort of Calvinistic ethos which has discouraged generations of believers from thinking they can ever be good enough to receive Communion. At a time when the culture generally is more tolerant of 'failure', accepting mess as part and parcel of life, should we not be encouraging one another to be true to ourselves, accepting that being Christian is not about being infallible, and that evangelism is more about inviting others to join us on the journey, because we share the same questions and problems as others have, than it is about 'selling' people the 'right' answers to life's problems?<sup>28</sup> Once more, the New Testament insistently calls us back to this emphasis, with many images that depict the spiritual life as a process, and its extensive use of the language of 'new birth' which also invites us to look to the future possibilities of who we might become, as distinct from the imagery of death which has been so popular with previous generations, but which inevitably directs us to the mistakes of the past, and invites us to apportion blame rather than to trust in the transforming power of God's grace.<sup>29</sup> Finally (and following on from that), we need to rediscover church as a focus for witness and service. Other chapters in this book relate more specifically to the prophetic role that we are called on to fulfil, so it is unnecessary to say a great deal about the nature of that role here. But what we might call our 'prophetic attitude' certainly does relate to the theme of new ways of being church, for we can only effectively challenge others to follow the way of Christ if we are continually hearing

---

<sup>27</sup> Walter Wink, *Transforming Bible Study* (Nashville: Abingdon Press 1990), 69.

<sup>28</sup> For a Biblically-based exploration of this understanding of Christian life, see Janet O Hagberg & Robert A Guelich, *The Critical Journey* (Salem WI: Sheffield Publishing Co. 1995).

<sup>29</sup> Historically, this phenomenon is connected with the male dominance of theology. Cf John Drane, *The McDonaldization of the Church*, 173-182; Grace Jantzen, 'Necrophilia and Natality: what does it mean to be religious?' in *Scottish Journal of Religious Studies* 19/1 (1998), 101-121; Margaret L Hammer, *Giving Birth: Reclaiming Biblical Metaphor for Pastoral Practice* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press 1994).

God's voice for ourselves, and allowing our lives to be challenged and changed in the process. We have something to share with others not because we are different, but because we are no different, and we can become credible witnesses not as we condemn others and dismiss what we see as their inadequate spiritualities, but as we constantly listen to the Gospel and appropriate its challenge in our own lives. 'God leaves us free to choose how to share our faith. But our options are never neutral - every methodology either illustrates or betrays the gospel we announce'.<sup>30</sup>

This approach will certainly be risky, and we have every expectation that some will regard it as too 'woolly' and maybe even dangerous. But for those who are prepared to take the risk, we believe it will hold out new possibilities of personal healing and wholeness in a fragmented world, as well as the prospect of a church renewed in its own soul. Actually (and here is a final theological point), its very weakness is likely to be the real secret of its power, and in that respect it will be incarnational in every sense of the word, for this is how Jesus himself came bearing the good news. And even St. Paul - often unfairly castigated as a revisionist commentator on the message of Jesus - reminded his readers in Corinth (who, of all people, were tempted to think that they could best do God's work in their own way and by their own power) that '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 to nothing things that are ...' (1 Corinthians 1:27-28). In our struggle to find new ways of being church in a context of rapid cultural change, that is perhaps the best news of all, and the most truly empowering message for the post-modern age.

### **For further reflection**

In summing all this up, here are a few further questions and ideas that may be especially helpful to those who will be part of the discussions on new ways of being church, at the Scottish Ecumenical Assembly.

\* A key question that we all need to ask ourselves is, 'How inclusive do we actually want our churches to be?' For a fun way of exploring that - but one that will also direct us into some serious matters - visit <[www.belief.net](http://www.belief.net)> and try the 'spiritual personality type' test that you will find there. Everyone to whom we've recommended this has found it a useful way into talking of some of these issues - and we've used it in the context of academic conferences as well as local church groups and with students. Once you've gone through it for yourself, take a look at the various categories it identifies, and reflect on the messages posted on the various bulletin boards by people who score differently. Then ask where you would like to draw the boundaries of the church, using those categories. To put it another way, what actually do you think is involved in being Christian? How much belief is enough? Or not enough?

\* Leading on from that is a whole network of matters related to how we encounter God. This seems to be at the heart of many of the complaints about our ways of being church, heard especially from those who might be characterized as 'spiritual searchers'. We need to remember that not everybody is interested in spirituality, of course, but neither can we forget that those who are are precisely the groups of people

---

<sup>30</sup> *Mission and Evangelism, an Ecumenical Affirmation* (Geneva: World Council of Churches 1982), paragraph 28.

who, in past generations, would have been movers and shakers in the churches - and who are still active in matters related to social and personal transformation, but through other channels, most notably single-issue pressure groups. These people insistently ask us how we know that God is involved in our lives. What are we going to say to them? John Wesley famously spoke of his heart being 'strangely warmed', and in a world where people will go onto TV shows and reveal their innermost personal secrets, people want to have a blow-by-blow account of what all that means. Are we sometimes so reluctant to speak openly about our own faith and journey through life that it can seem as if we have nothing to say? This might require a major paradigm shift for some of us, because so many church people do appear to be very private individuals. What is the reason for our apparent reticence in matters of personal spirituality? And how might we encourage and stand alongside one another in an empowering way?

\* Finally, there are several issues connected with institutional systems and organization. If we really do want church to be accessible for all people in all times and places, some things will need to change. What about those who, by definition, will never be a part of church if it only happens on Sunday mornings? This is a question whose importance is increasing at an exponential rate of growth, as we increasingly become a seven-day-a-week, 24-hours-a-day society, and as our family relationships change and reform in such a way that even for those not in work on Sundays, it is often the only day on which they can see their children, or indeed take any form of relaxation from the pressures of life - all things which, in other circumstances, Christians would tend to applaud. Are we going to be flexible enough in our approach to facilitate gatherings that can qualify as 'real church' but which may happen for some on different days and in different circumstances than has traditionally been the case? Many churches do have effective connections with their local communities, through parent and toddler groups, youth clubs, craft meetings, and a whole variety of other things - and all too often bemoan the fact that the people who come on Tuesday mornings, or Wednesday lunchtimes, or Friday nights, never make it on Sundays. Do we perhaps need to think more creatively about how such activities might become spiritually meaningful in themselves, not by turning them into services, but by creating spaces in which new initiatives might spring up from those who themselves are already active in such groups? After all, that approach has been one of the most significant factors in the rapid growth of Christianity in other parts of the world. You wouldn't need to call it a 'base Christian community' to see its potential.

---

---

John Drane has been involved in the ecumenical movement in Scotland and internationally for the last twenty years. His most well-known book is *The McDonaldization of the Church* (London: Darton Longman and Todd 2000).

Olive M Fleming Drane has a full-time ministry in the creative arts, and is widely known throughout the Scottish churches for her clowning as the characters Valentine and Barni. She is also an adjunct professor of evangelism in the School of Theology at Fuller Seminary, California. Her personal spiritual journey is documented in the book *Clowns, Storytellers and Disciples* (Oxford: BRF, 2002). John & Olive frequently work together. In 1999 they jointly presented the Bible readings at the *Anglican Conference on Evangelism* (ACE), which marked the end of the Decade of Evangelism, and also made a joint presentation on 'Religion and Spirituality' to the *Theology and Evangelism* conference, held in the University of Durham as a follow-up to ACE in March 2001.

---

---