

Article reprinted from *CrossWay Extra* Spring 2004

(C)opyright Church Society; material may be used for non-profit purposes provided that the source is acknowledged and the text is not altered.

MISSION SHAPED CHURCH

David Phillips

The influence of a broad evangelicalism is increasingly evident in some of the national initiatives and reports of the Church of England. This was a factor in the response to the ARCIC report *Gift of Authority* and it was also noticeable in the new report *Mission Shaped Church*.

Bishop Graham Cray chaired the group that produced the report and he presented it to the recent General Synod. James Jones, Bishop of Liverpool, moved the motion in support and stressed how the report was about recognising 'creative ways of being church' that have grown out of the grass roots of the Church. The report aims to set out an integrated strategy for both neighbourhood (parish churches etc) and network church as a response to the mobile and diverse environment of today. This sort of thinking was evident in other proposals for a new Mission and Ministry measure (replacing in part the Pastoral Measure) and also in the way the Church Commissioners are trying to allocate resources for mission.

The Church of England must become a missionary Church. We can no longer rely on people coming through our doors and we cannot assume any knowledge of the Christian faith in those around us. It is important that churches are outward looking and do not simply rely on what worked in the past. As the Bishop of Manchester has recently been reported as saying (and as others have said for a long time) within a generation the Church of England may disappear if it does not stop the recent decline. Mission must dominate the agenda for the Churches.

Despite this there are serious questions to be asked which *Mission Shaped Church* does not seem to ask. First, what do we expect of Christians? The media latched onto the fact that the report talks about church services at times other than Sunday. Their reporting on this was neither fair nor objective but it is true that the report does encourage Churches to be innovative about how to reach people with the gospel and that means ensuring that they do have opportunity to hear. The danger is that we forget that the gospel should transform lives. As the Bible shows, God's purpose is to create for himself a special people. This is what the Church is supposed to be and since the early days Christians have seen it as important to meet on the Lord's day, the first day of the week. It is not a matter of legalism but rather that we express what we have been saved to become - the people of God. Therefore, Christians will want, as far as they are able, to shape their lives to reflect this new reality - the gospel will transform lives. This is a major issue for today's church and in more areas than just church meetings. In our eagerness to take away the barriers and so make it easier for people to become Christians we are in danger of stifling spiritual growth by not calling for and encouraging lives to be transformed by the gospel.

The second concern with the report is that whilst it has a lot to say about how we should communicate the message by word and deed it is far from clear as to what the message is. This is a fairly fundamental question and yet it is one which is rarely asked in our broad 'Church of England'. Indeed many 'evangelicals' are so concerned about the method of evangelism and about the image we present that the message has become secondary. But it is the gospel that is the power of God to salvation and whilst method can matter (we need only see how Jesus dealt with different people to realise this), it is the message that is the core. The Church of England is in such a terminally sick condition because it has been so influenced by the liberal agenda that the gospel has been lost. To the world around the shallowness of what is preached in local churches and what is said by national figures is all too evident, it has no substance and certainly not the power of God.

But it is worse still. Not only is there no real message in much of what the Church of England does it is sending out signals completely at odds with gospel. This was illustrated amply by the recent

General Synod. First there was the admission in a speech by one clergy member that he is a practising homosexual. What this shows the watching world is that on a key moral issue the Church which was once so clear now seems to be changing its mind as the world around it changes. This being so, why should they believe anything that the Church or its ministers say? Secondly, in the same debate the Synod was treated to a lady vicar saying that Jesus got things wrong and that some of the things he said were 'a bit naughty'. This is pure heresy, but few seem to have been scandalised by what she said and it is hard to imagine that any action will be taken. Later on, whilst discussing the apparently innocuous subject of lectionary and calendar, it became clear that several speakers felt there were bits of the Bible that are really not fit for public consumption and would rather that they were left out of the lectionary.

All these serve to illustrate the way in which liberalism has damaged the Church. The very notion of authority has been undermined and in particular the authority of the Bible has been rejected. Amongst the broad camp that calls itself evangelical many appear unwilling to confront these errors and too often appear to have actually accepted the liberal mindset whilst retaining an evangelistic outlook. As long as these errors go unchecked the message of the Church is compromised and the more we concentrate on method the greater is the likelihood that the gospel will be neglected. Unless the Church of England is prepared to tackle these deep-rooted issues it cannot hope to become what it is supposed to be.