



Engaging With The Community

The challenge
of mission
in the
21st Century

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This discussion document is prepared by the Social Issues and Resources Committee of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland. The Committee is grateful to the contributors who have taken time out from their busy schedules to prepare succinct papers, based on their personal experiences and private study.

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FOREWORD

Wherever we live on this island – in the city or the country; north or south of the border; east or west of the Bann – the church of Jesus Christ faces enormous challenges. We live in a time of frighteningly rapid change. We live in a context where the church's past influence (even dominance) is quickly eroded. No longer is the church seen as the bedrock of Irish society. No longer is the church allowed the final word in matters of morality. No longer is the church's opinion sought on every matter of importance to our community. We are experiencing a seismic shift in Western culture – Christians from every tradition are having to come to terms with the fact that life will simply never be the same again. It is this earth-shattering change which *Engaging with the Community* seeks to begin to address.

This booklet is definitely not the product of a committee trying to find ways to occupy its time and to justify its existence. It tackles a crucial strategic issue for anyone seeking to reach other people for Christ and to show them his love. The plain fact is that the church has already drifted some considerable way from the people it formerly counted as its flock – we are in grave danger of losing touch with our world, whether our world be Ballymacarrett, Ballinamallard or Ballymun. This collection of papers has been put together in an attempt to help local congregations think through what re-establishing this link might mean – what faithfulness to Christ will look like in their context.

Of course, some may say that this whole enterprise is a waste of time. It could be argued that there is little point trying to engage with fallen human society in any meaningful way, beyond proclaiming the message of the gospel. Within our denomination, it has on occasion been assumed (and at times even openly asserted) that 'social witness' was almost exclusively the preserve of those who were less comfortable with overt evangelistic strategies. Whatever the reality within the Presbyterian Church in Ireland in the past, this is clearly no longer the case.

This booklet rests on a firm commitment to the primacy of evangelism. We would affirm, for example, that people are not reconciled to God because someone gives them a blanket, or provides childcare for them. As the Apostle Paul makes so clear in Romans, people are rescued from sin and brought under the Lordship of Christ as they respond to the proclamation of the message of Christ – not by *social* witness (or any other kind of 'witness' that doesn't involve an explanation of the great news about Christ). However, in our time, we must recognise that if we do not *engage with* the community, our attempts to *reach* the community with the message of Christ will be rendered largely ineffective.

There are two compelling reasons for engaging with the community. *First*, our proclamation will ring hollow if it isn't backed up with practical concern. If our message is shouted out from our fortress to a world at a distance our words will simply be blown away by the wind. Of course, the greatest expression of our compassion for people is that we care enough to share the glorious message of Jesus with them. But the plain

fact is that people who are not Christians often do not immediately recognise this – they do not always interpret our proclamation as an expression of love. This is why our proclamation must be matched by practical Christ-like love. In other words, engaging with the community is a fundamental building block of effective proclamation (this is part of the purpose of Jesus' own healing ministry). *Second*, we must 'engage' because we are called to care for those around us – we are called to exercise a ministry of mercy to our world. This is 'caring with no strings attached'. It is not evangelistic in and of itself – it is simply a physical expression of the grace of God. This is why we must be close enough to our community to care.

This booklet rests on the premise that evangelism and social action are inextricably linked in the purposes of God. They are not the same thing – neither are they alternatives. It is just as misguided to refuse to give hungry people soup because they need the gospel more, as it is to say that it doesn't much matter if we are actually sharing the gospel with anyone as long as we are giving out soup! We simply cannot abandon social action to those we perceive to be theologically well to the left of us. Nor can we abandon evangelism (proclamation) to those to the right. If we are disciples of Jesus, we must commit to both.

This perspective is teased out in the articles by Sir Fred Catherwood and Norman Hamilton with which this booklet begins. Then we move from the theory to the more practical perspectives brought by Ken McBride (the role of the church in a local community) and Esmond Birnie (writing on political involvement).

Chapter 5 – *The Paradox of Prosperity* is an interesting analysis of issues affecting families and older people and the emergence of a new 'spirituality' prepared for The Salvation Army by the Henley Centre. This extract is published with permission of the Salvation Army.

These studies are intended to be no more than a catalyst for Christian leaders seeking to address these issues in their own context.

We need to take a long hard look at our ministry as the church of Jesus Christ at the beginning of the 21st Century. We need to be much clearer in our thinking, and much more honest in our assessment of our impact on society. Of course, we must be engaged in evangelism, but this evangelism must be authenticated by a real, caring engagement with the community. On top of that, we must also be prepared to engage with and 'seek the welfare of the city', even when no obvious evangelistic benefit accrues, simply because God has told us to. Our prayer is that this booklet will enable many in the church to start to tackle the enormous challenges we face in a way that brings honour and glory to our Lord Jesus, and ultimately contributes to many people hearing and embracing the glorious gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Gary Millar

(On behalf of the Social Issues and Resources Committee of the Board of Social Witness of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland)

CHAPTER 1

Engaging with the Community: Distraction, luxury or necessity?

Sir Fred Catherwood

I am old enough to remember the slump in the thirties and the anxious men who stood outside the Belfast docks every morning in the hope that their name would be called for work that day. In those days before the welfare state, their clothes were shabby and their faces pinched.

After the war we had governments committed to full employment and a national health service; money was spent on new schools and the universities were expanded. There was a big new government housing programme, although the troubles started because it was not fairly shared, and because everyone believed that government was responsible for social justice. So for fifty years, people have looked to government. Not only was the church no longer the first resort of the poor and needy (as it always was before), but it was thought to be part of the remaining problem and not a part of the solution.

Over two generations, as society became more secular, the church has looked more and more like a social club for like-minded people, where those not like-minded were not welcome. The doors at the top of the steps were shut as the world bustled past through the week; and on Sunday, when they were briefly open, the world was at home. But that is not the church as described in the Bible, it is not the church for the best part of two thousand years, nor is it the church in most of the world today.

When Christ was asked what was the greatest commandment, he replied that it was to love the Lord our God with all our heart: but he added 'and the second is like it, to love your neighbour as yourself.' (Matt. 22:34-39) When asked, by someone who evidently wanted to limit the number of neighbours, 'Who is my neighbour?' he told the story of the good Samaritan.

The Jews and the Samaritans were not on speaking terms, because of differences both religious and political. But the point of the story is that they were neighbours. When the Samaritan saw the wounded Jew lying on the Jericho road - someone who badly needed help - he took him to the nearest inn, had his wounds dressed and paid his bill until he was better. The two religious Jews thought that their religious duties were more urgent and passed by on the other side of the road.

So Jesus teaches that our neighbours are all those who need our help, even though they are not of our race or religion. The church is not an exclusive club for the benefit of members only. We are here to help.

Jesus was following the teaching of the Old Testament prophets. Throughout their writings are accusations that Israel has stopped caring for the fatherless, the widows and the aliens (in our language, the immigrants); that governments allow breaches of justice which enable the rich to 'add house to house and join field to field' (Isa. 5:8) and leave the landless to endless servitude.

One of the first accounts of the early church was their appointment of deacons to make sure that the resources of the church were used to feed and help those of their members in need. And Paul, in his letters continued to ask for support for the church in need, pointing out that, one day those who were the donors might be in need of help themselves.

Charity begins at home, but it does not end there. A selfish pagan culture was suddenly confronted by neighbourly love. This love and care so impressed their neighbours that the church spread like wildfire. They did not change the Empire by sending petitions to the Emperors. It was because the ordinary citizen could not understand why the Emperors wanted to execute the best citizens in the town. So gradually the persecutions faded. Where in AD 70 the violent resistance of the Jews failed, the power of Christian love melted the Empire.

It is arguable that Imperial recognition began to corrupt the church. But the great Roman Empire did not last much longer. Within a century it was overthrown by barbarian invaders. And Christians showed the same love to the invaders as they had done before. They set up mission stations and looked after their sick, their children and the travellers. They taught them to love their neighbours and not to fight each other. And slowly in their turn, the invaders were converted: the Goths, the Franks, the Angles, Saxons and Danes and, finally, the Slavs. The remaining British Christians who had retreated into Wales sent Patrick to Ireland; the converted Irish sent Columba to Scotland; the new Scots Christians started to convert England and an English Christian the Dutch.

The latest research shows that this was not top-down conversion. No king would cut down the sacred tree or burn the totem pole unless he was sure that the people were behind him. Otherwise he would quickly be disposed of. The king and nobles recognised what had already happened. Love melted the hearts of people and kings.

When we Protestants look backwards in time, our view is obscured by the corruption of Christianity in the first half of the second millennium, in a church so powerful that the rulers made their courtiers Bishops. King Henry II appointed one of his courtiers, Thomas à Becket as Archbishop and had him killed for not obeying the king's will; the age when the church took the sword in three successive crusades against Islam.

We should ask ourselves not only how Europe was converted in the first place, but how today the Chinese church, despite the Maoist persecution, is now the second largest in the world.

We should also ask what is happening in our own country today. The 'social gospel' of the last century argued that there was no need to preach the gospel salvation from the guilt of sin. They went straight to the top, persuading governments to provide social security, better education, a national health service, better housing and full employment. In a gathering consensus, Fabians and socialists also preached social salvation by good works and, from the end of World War II, we had the welfare state and full employment. Christians should not grudge higher taxes to help the poor or lower dividends to provide for higher investment and full employment.

But the social gospel emptied the pews and materialism took over as the ruling creed. So sin and selfishness were not banished and society became materialistic and greedy. If there were no God and no life after death, then it made sense to grab what we can, while we can, however we can and hold on to it hard. Full employment was wrecked by greed; the better off would no longer stand for redistribution of wealth through tax and for the last twenty years unemployment has risen again. And if there were no right and wrong, then it did not matter if we left our wives and children for someone else. So, an even bigger disaster followed: the family started to break up.

In a study commissioned three years ago by the Evangelical Alliance, seventy social projects reported that the two basic reasons why those they were helping had got into trouble were the break-up of the family and persistent unemployment, each interacting with the other. The rate of social break-up is now so high that the social services, also squeezed by the pressure to keep down taxes, can no longer cope. So in our newly pagan society, people once more are knocking on church doors for help.

To begin with churches tried to send them back to the social services. It was when teenagers started to appear on the streets, kicked out by their mother's new man, that the churches realised the extent of the change. Then the teenagers, in their misery, took to drugs and, to fund the habit, to crime, so that there are now large parts of big cities which are no-go areas for the police.

For the last six years, since I retired from the European Parliament, I have been trying to network church projects, old and new in our major cities. I am fairly confident that there will shortly be a network in Belfast, and we hope by the end of next year to have twenty-five city networks altogether, owned by the churches, and looked after on their behalf by a small team of lay Christians. The first object is to let churches know where they can go for specialised help, then to fill in the gaps (there are about thirty different types of specialised project now needed) and to help projects in the same business to learn from each other.

What I have found is a repeat of the pattern of the early church. It is love and not argument which melts people's hearts. We live in a society where real love is a scarce commodity. So it is hard to preach a God of love unless we can show by our actions what love is.

There are those who say that the work of the churches is to preach the gospel to save people for eternity and not to spend our energies in social work which cannot save them. I asked a church which used this argument how many outsiders came to church to listen to the gospel and there was a long silence. It was clear that no one did.

But when I go to a church which takes its commitment to its neighbours seriously and puts time and money into projects to help them, I find it full of people who have been attracted to the church by their evident love. They have not only become Christians themselves, but they have a strong concern for their neighbours who are not yet Christians, so the church has wave after wave of new converts. These are not normally big and well-funded churches; they are often down back streets, where the people are and, somehow or another, they find the money and the time for all they have to do.

But perhaps the strongest argument is that our Lord himself not only preached the gospel; he also healed the sick and fed the hungry. It was the disciples who told him to send the thousands away, and Jesus who said he could not do that, because they would faint for lack of food. He mixed with sinners and showed them love. He knew that many would find the gospel too hard and would walk away, but he fed and healed them just the same, because God is love and when love sees a need it tries to meet it. When Jesus met a woman, who had already lost her husband, following her only son's bier out of the town of Nain, his heart went out to her. She had not only lost a son, but the remaining breadwinner, so he restored her son to life.

Some of the Christians I have met have extraordinary gifts. But most are just ordinary people who have seen a need and have set out to meet it. It was the love which they felt for the need around them which led them on.

The extent of the disaster in our society can hardly be exaggerated. The break-up of the family is unprecedented. Until now every religion and every society throughout recorded history has made the family the cornerstone of the social system. It is where children are taught how to live with other people and it is the love of parents which makes their discipline acceptable.

What has been imposed on us by our man-made religion is a social experiment which is now reaching disastrous proportions. A quarter of our families are now broken, so more than a quarter of the children have lost one parent, usually a father, and we are now getting to the position where grandparents, who used to step in to help, have already broken up. At the current rate of deterioration, half the families will soon be broken. Teachers know at once which of their pupils come from broken homes and are most likely to get into trouble.

No Christian church can ring-fence itself from this disaster. We are to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world. We must not be of the world and follow its ways. But we are in the world. These people in need are our neighbours and Christ's command is that we should love them and, as Paul says, 'Love never fails' (1 Cor. 13:8).

The former Vice President of the European Parliament and MEP for Cambridgeshire, Sir Fred Catherwood was appointed as President of the Evangelical Alliance in 1994, following a distinguished career in business as well as politics. He has subsequently pioneered the development of Christian Action Networks, an Evangelical Alliance initiative encouraging churches and individuals to be more effective in reaching out to their communities. His latest book, It Can Be Done, surveys the role of the church in combating the many social and economic problems facing us today. Sir Fred is married with three adult children and lives in Cambridgeshire.

CHAPTER 2

The Bible, The Church and The Community: A Theology of Community Development

Norman Hamilton

Introduction

Northern Ireland is going through a time of enormous change in its social and political life. Much power was initially returned by London to a local Assembly on Thursday 2 December 1999, and an Executive was formed within hours. The new institutions went through several rocky phases in 2000, but the general hope remains that in due course a stable, locally elected and locally accountable 'representative' form of democracy after more than 25 years of 'direct rule' from London will function alongside the 'participative' democracy which has been an important part of the political scene for more than 10 years. Participative democracy is built, amongst other concepts, upon the twin principles of *partnership* and the special focus of this article: *community development*.

What is Community Development?

The essence of community development (CD) is the empowerment of both local individuals and local communities, and doing things with people rather than for them. (Kinkead 1996) Its value system is based on concepts such as inclusiveness, local responsibility, consensus, prior consultation and local accountability. It draws on volunteering in the community as well as having paid staff/activists, and is often based around working with particular groups of people (e.g. Youth; Unemployed; Senior Citizens; Parents and their young children; Residents' Associations), or focused on a particular issue in an area (for example - artistic/cultural development; dealing with trauma/violence/abuse of all kinds; training and employment).

The Church and Community Development

Both Acheson in 1996 and I (as part of work undertaken within the Visiting Fellowship Programme of the Centre for Voluntary Action Studies at the University of Ulster at Coleraine) have made the following observations on the interface between CD and the traditional role of the Church:

1. The CD movement can often supplant the traditional pastoral role of the churches by providing an alternative source and system of care and support in a local community, underpinned by grant aid from a wide variety of governmental and other sources.

2. Much - and often even the greatest amount - of the youth work in a local Protestant community is done by local churches through their youth clubs, uniformed organisations such as Boys' Brigade and Guides, and similar groups. For example, my study in 1999 gave a current best estimate of around 75% of church based youth work in urban North Belfast as being with young people who have no other meaningful connection with church life.
3. Community organisations view the churches in a variety of ways. In some cases they suspect the churches of primarily working to an evangelistic agenda under the guise of community involvement; in other cases they seek the active help of the churches as an equal partner in the development of the community, and are either puzzled or agitated when that help is not obviously forthcoming; in still other cases, the input is welcomed, even if it is not always well understood.
4. In parallel, churches from the evangelical tradition see community organisations in a variety of ways. Sometimes they see them as partners in the local community, though in practice the two groups rarely partner actively with each other. In other cases they want little to do with community organisations, seeing them as secular distractions from the primary task of evangelism in the local community. In most instances however, there is little consideration of the community relationship, often because the active church members are so fully engaged in the daily routine of church life and have very little spare capacity. This over stretching of church members is a particular challenge to urban congregations which face a plethora of problems. Yet this lack of a church/community dialogue and dynamic has become a source of disappointment for the community, and a source of increasing disquiet for many congregational leaders. This disquiet on the part of the churches arises from a variety of factors, some biblically based, others more pragmatic.

Pragmatic factors:

- an awareness that there is an increasingly negative view of the church within many local communities
- the need to increase understanding/appreciation in the wider community of the contribution that the churches make to civil society
- an awareness that the very existence of local congregations is threatened if they cannot connect with a new generation

Biblical factors:

- a return to a more biblical focus on the need to 'Go and make disciples' (Matt. 28), rather than depending on the predominant model of mainly pastoring those who are already church members or have a church affiliation
- an increasing sense that there can be, and ought to be, a shared agenda between the church and the community which can be of benefit to both (Jer. 29)

- the need for the church as a whole to find relevant forms of being 'salt and light' (Matt. 5) that engage effectively with where people and communities actually are, rather than rely only on individual initiatives and responsibility
- a renewed appreciation of the Reformed doctrines of common grace, and the sovereignty of God in the lives of those who make no particular Christian profession

Developing a way forward for the Church

It is worthwhile listing some of the main reasons for church involvement in social action over the centuries:

- the Puritans sought to build a 'holy commonwealth' and campaigned against anything that prevented people hearing the gospel (e.g. too long a working day in factories; anything that could be seen as a substitute for the gospel; particular evils such as sexual wrongdoing, gambling, drunkenness, anything that was 'sin' - especially moral issues and those involving personal responsibility)
- as a response to secularisation, declining church attendance and declining church influence
- philanthropy - not only for evangelistic reasons, but as an end in itself
- for moral as well as gospel purposes - as in the leading role the churches played in education
- as the proper partner of evangelism

Whilst this list could be extended and refined, it seems clear that little of the rationale for social involvement in a previous generation sits easily with the current pressure to which churches are having to respond. The call today from the CD movement and its activists to partner with them is not for philanthropic purposes, nor in gospel partnership, nor for help to deal with alcoholism, nor from any desire to fill churches again or help 'Christianise' society. Rather the call is to join with what are often primarily secularised groups in an agenda of benefiting the community and improving the quality of life and opportunity for local people.

The dilemma for the churches is acute. In many urban areas they are in serious decline, and certainly there is some feeling that the decline has an air of inevitability about it. One example will suffice. In North Belfast two Protestant churches (one Methodist Church and one Presbyterian Church) closed on the same Sunday in August 1999. The closures were part of an ongoing pattern of church closure, congregational amalgamation and dwindling resources. Alongside this decline in the churches, community development activity in the area is huge, with over 300 independently constituted community groups on the mailing list of the North Belfast Partnership Board. For the churches, partnership arrangements with local community groupings could well be seen as endorsement of the secular agenda of those groups, and as drawing away very limited and declining church resources from the primary task of evangelism and Christian discipleship. Yet failure to relate positively and properly to those same community groups will further reinforce the perception that neither the local church nor the gospel itself has any relevance to, nor cares about the needs of ordinary people who have suffered a great deal in the thirty years of civil unrest.

It is also important to remember that the dilemma of whether to concentrate on the 'essential task of preaching the gospel' or to risk diluting the effort by involvement in other activities has been a troublesome one for evangelicals for a very long time. However, 1974 saw a major sea change in evangelical opinion. The Lausanne Congress on World Evangelisation expressed repentance for previous neglect in the field of evangelical social commitment. In the following years, the relationship between evangelism and social activity was positively expressed as *'two blades of a pair of scissors... or the two wings of a bird'*.

The remainder of this paper builds on such theology and suggests that there can be, and indeed ought to be, a biblically faithful and God-honouring relationship between the church and the local community, and one which engages properly with the parameters set by the current climate of partnership expectations and community development. The difficulties of developing and maintaining that proper relationship are considerable, but the costs, both in the loss of biblical fidelity and practical outworking, of not doing so may be even greater.

The Basic Issue: The Biblical view of Church as Community

One of the striking features of much mainstream evangelicalism is the apparent lack of community *within* churches, in spite of the clear biblical mandate to live that way. By its very nature as the functioning body of Christ, mutuality and inter-dependence are central to the life of a healthy local church (see 1 Cor. 12). Yet this biblical pattern of community and mutuality has all but disappeared from much of our congregational life. Individualism is rampant, and even a cursory look at Christian lifestyle makes the point. Conversation about spiritual matters is rare. It is extremely rare to find a family that prays together. Even prayer together in the church is almost a lost art. The practice of giving thanks to God at mealtimes has virtually died out. In restaurants, Christian people rarely give public and proper thanks together for their meal. In church life meetings proliferate and activity increases. Yet these do not build the very relationships which are so central to the Bible's teaching on how church should operate, and which are essential for sustained spiritual growth.

The conclusion seems inevitable (to this writer at least!). Until churches and local congregations recapture the biblical emphasis on how members should relate to each other, and practice it day in and day out, it is hard to see how a relationally starved wider community can be effectively reached for Christ. If relationships matter so little to believers, how can unbelievers be won? With the need for biblically faithful community clearly established, we can turn to the question of how a healthy church can relate to the wider community.

Building a Theological Framework

There are at least three sets of relationships and responsibilities for the local church in relationship to its local community.

1. The dimension of EVANGELISM and DISCIPLESHIP. This is the primary dimension, since it was set by Christ himself and is the 'mission statement' of his church (Matt. 28). Any church grouping that loses sight of this central responsibility is unfaithful to both the Lord and the teaching of Scripture.
2. The dimension of CARE FOR GOD'S WORLD. This is encapsulated in the biblical principles that flow from the account of creation in the opening chapters of Genesis - especially Genesis 1.26-28 and Psalm 8.
3. The dimension of CARE FOR PEOPLE in need. This is a constant theme throughout scripture and in the teaching of Christ, and relates to the theme of community development.

Christian people and the churches have historically been at the forefront of caring for people. At the local level, whether one looks at the provision of education (primary schools attached to local churches; Methodist College, Belfast), or health care (Mater Hospital, Belfast), or the philanthropic movements in previous generations, or the work of groups such as the Salvation Army, care for those in need has often been done on a significant scale, even in the Belfast area. All the major denominations continue to devote significant resources of staff, capital and other resources to social witness and action. The work of the Presbyterian Board of Social Witness continues to make a huge contribution to the well-being of many marginalised or weaker groups in society. As such, we are responding to the constant biblical theme that because God loves people, then his church and his people are to mirror that love in daily life in the wide variety of ways open to them.

However, with the provision of state sponsored education for all, the rise of the Welfare State and provision of a wide range of social services, the secularisation of society, the current emphases on empowerment, and the widespread acceptance of virtually all value systems, there is much less opportunity for and much less willingness in the public mind to accept help that is seen in any way as charitable, philanthropic or paternalistic. People increasingly see it as their right to be 'consumers' of help and support, choosing what they want - when they want it - from whatever provider they wish. Personal choice allegedly reigns supreme. Other than with particular well-defined groups of people, the scope for exclusively church based help for people in the wider community is increasingly limited, since it is largely unwanted. This in turn means that the scope for the promotion of biblical values is also restricted. Thus the means of carrying out the biblical injunctions to care for people in need is having to be reworked, to cope with the new parameters of community development and partnership expectations.

The Significance of 'Common Grace'

To help meet these challenges, the church in general and evangelicals in particular need to recapture the Reformed Doctrine of Common Grace (see e.g. Calvin's *Institutes* 2.2.13; Berkhof's *Systematic Theology* 436ff.). This has been much neglected in recent

years, perhaps due to the need to put evangelism and discipleship back in their central place. But its neglect has tended to make evangelicals undervalue or even devalue what God has been doing outside church and Christian circles.

Berkhof points to five areas where churches can legitimately and enthusiastically engage with people in the wider community, because the work of the Holy Spirit can be openly discerned:

- in the restraint of sin
- in the maintenance of order in the life of the community/society
- in the promotion of God-honouring standards in the wider community
- in the shaping of public opinion that is at least consistent with God's standards
- in the influencing of conduct in the public arena

These opportunities are in addition to the scope for explicit church-based work which is of help to those in the wider community - e.g. youth work; social witness and action.

Further guidance on engagement with the wider community can be found in the link between Jeremiah 29.1-14 (especially vv.4-9) and 1 Peter 1. Winter, in his book *Seek the Welfare of the City* argues as follows... *'A paradigm for the role of the Christian in society in 1 Peter can be found in Jeremiah 29:7. In Jeremiah's day the Jews in exile were exhorted to settle in Babylon, marry 'seek the welfare of the city' to which the Lord had carried them, and pray for its peace. How then should the Christians in 1 Peter spend their days on earth? It is clear that as spiritual 'sojourners' and 'alien residents' they must withdraw from the self-indulgent lifestyle of their contemporaries (2.11) and seek the welfare of the city in which they live. They were instructed to spend their days in this earthly city seeking the blessing of its inhabitants. (2.11ff) (15-17)*

Biblical Theology and Community Development

Having built a credible basis for engagement with the community both in terms of social action and in community development, it is important to bring some biblical perspective to the CD movement itself. This is not entirely straightforward since there are so many elements in it and expressions of it. However, on the basis of Kinkead's definition noted above, it is possible to offer some biblically based comment on two key areas of importance in community development.

The principle of *'inclusiveness'* must not be taken to mean that all ideas and values are, by definition, of equal worth. For example, projects with a substantial inflow of funds from the National Lottery are not self-evidently to be supported in that form, even if the project itself is eminently worthwhile. Again, it might be far from clear that seeking provision of new premises for a particular project or group is the best use of increasingly scarce resources. Funding issues are profoundly important to biblical thinking, since God is the ultimate owner of everything on this earth, and we cannot be other than mere stewards of his resources (Psalm 50.9-12).

Concepts of *empowerment and facilitating* the expressed needs of others need to be handled with care in the light of the (unpopular) biblical teaching on sin. Sin is so deeply embedded in the human condition that every part of our nature is flawed and cannot be relied upon to seek after what is ultimately either the best or even what is good (e.g. Psalm 51.5 and 1 John). It seems to me that community development can deal more satisfactorily with what might be called 'structural' sin, and less satisfactorily with 'personal' sin. By this is meant that there are structures in society and in the way it is run, which can oppress with injustice or inequity, and demean people who are precious in God's sight. To the extent that community development can challenge such wrong, it is highly desirable and ought to be vigorously supported. For example, to campaign for employment opportunities is to give value to people whom God designed for normal daily work (Exodus 23.12; 1Thessalonians 4.11). To show mercy and bring hope to those who are vulnerable/oppressed is to follow the command of Christ himself to love our neighbour as intensely as we love ourselves (Luke 10.25 -37).

Irrespective, however, of 'structural' sin, it has to be recognised that many people live in such a way that they make a significant contribution to the difficult situations they find themselves in. For example, it is difficult to interpret biblical teaching in such a way that 'empowering youth' should regard teenage contraception as a norm - even though biblical teaching demands a thoroughly compassionate response to a teenage pregnancy. Again, an over-developed emphasis on the 'rights' of one community, group or individual *vis a vis* the needs of others is often best explained primarily in terms of a sinful attitude towards others, rather than by any other factor or consideration. (Proverbs 29 is well worth reading!). Consequently, care needs to be taken to ensure that support is not being given to something that is inherently weak or even wrong, even though community or individuals may be seeking it, or supporting it.

Conclusion

I have sought (a) to outline something of the secular and biblical framework within which church and community operate; (b) to offer an outline biblically faithful basis for engagement with the community development movement; (c) to draw attention to some of the caveats needed for a healthy Christian engagement. It is on this basis that partnership between church and community can be properly established. Church ought not to feel under pressure to agree with, or give support to everything that community desires or does - and vice versa. Yet it seems clear that there is mutuality not only of interest, but also of the need for practical co-operation on a wide variety of matters. There is an urgent need to build and maintain a 'proper' partnership and relationship between the local church and the local community, for the local church is often a very significant contributor to local civil society (Hamilton 1999). Without doubt and without compromise, there is plenty of common ground for church and community to work together on Jeremiah's injunction given almost 2600 years ago - *'Seek the Welfare of the City'*.

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CHAPTER 3

Our Church, Our Community: A personal perspective

Ken McBride

I rejoice that I was brought up in an ethos of evangelical faith where a passion for sharing the gospel seemed the most natural thing in the world. This ethos surrounded me in Mountpottinger Presbyterian Church, the congregation of my childhood, and was bolstered through membership of Scripture Union, their Inter Schools Camp movement, and Crusaders Bible Class. My Christian friends shared my evangelistic concerns and I was involved in a band that did coffee bar and other types of evangelism. Today there is nothing I find so stimulating, so faith-building, so much an honour and joy, as leading someone to personal faith in Christ. I know I can never make anyone a Christian, but to be available for God the Holy Spirit to use me to draw someone to Himself either through preaching or personal conversation, is the greatest thrill I can think of.

However, as I grew up I was also aware of what was termed the 'social gospel', and it seemed to me to be at variance with my evangelical convictions. It smacked of theological liberalism, and I wanted nothing to do with it. However two things helped to enlighten my thinking. Firstly, the setting up of TEAR Fund in 1968 under the leadership of the late George Hoffman. I believe 1960 had been designated by the United Nations as World Refugee Year, and something happened amongst evangelicals that was to lead to a most significant development. Money began to pour in to the Evangelical Alliance offices in London for relief purposes, and it didn't stop! So Evangelical Alliance found itself administering money for what was in effect social action. This eventually led to the formation of The Evangelical Alliance Relief Fund, or TEAR Fund, now a major charity. To listen to George Hoffman and his passionate advocacy of Christian action was to want to respond by active support. The work of TEAR Fund began to enlighten my social conscience in a biblical and informed manner.

Secondly, one of the most significant influences on my thinking theologically and biblically was John Stott. When he published *Issues Facing Christians Today*, his first chapter was entitled *'Involvement: is it our concern?'* Here was a cogent arguing of the idea that individual Christians are called both to be witnesses and servants, and that churches being made up of individually gifted members should utilise all the gifts available, so that whilst some might be stronger on preaching and others on acts of mercy, all kinds of gifts could be utilised in our gospel outreach.

However, the issue as to whether or not individual Christians and therefore the church should get involved in social action, is highlighted in the ministry of Jesus Himself. Matthew 4:17 records *Jesus began to preach, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near."* This must surely be central to the message the church proclaims. But when it comes to social involvement, what did Jesus do? He healed the sick, gave sight to the

blind, touched the untouchable lepers who were perhaps our equivalent of AIDS sufferers, and fed the hungry. At a very basic level, is that not an endorsement for the view that social action and preaching go together as two sides of the same coin? And crucially, what are the implications for us individually and as congregations? How can preaching the gospel or evangelism go hand in hand with social action?

To share something of my experience in Orangefield is in no way to suggest we have a model everyone should follow, or to say we are 'doing' social action more or better than others. In many ways we are a church not yet fully aware of the implications of making evangelism and social action mutually compatible. Our tradition as an evangelical congregation is a cherished and vital part of who we are, but in many ways we are on a journey we believe is directed by the Lord who is the head of the church.

Firstly, we began to recognise that a great deal of social action happens in our church even if we are not always aware of it. For example the young person who learns some first aid through one of the organisations is learning a skill that will help society. Or the improvement of facilities to enable disabled and elderly folk to access our services and organisations is a form of social action that potentially exposes more people to the preaching of the gospel. Again, when our members help each other naturally and out of love for the Lord in a practical way, we preach through action. For example, many times after a bereavement in the church I see people leaving in meals to the family, or looking after young children. This kind of 'social action' from the church has been a powerful witness to non Christian people. So most churches are involved anyway.

Secondly, we realised some years ago that in order to reach more people in the community we needed to see what we were not doing that would be of benefit to those inside and without the church. This led to the formation of a parent and toddler group and we now have some 90 parents on the roll with the large majority being non church members. We also set up a Playgroup and this meets four mornings per week. These groups to date have been very successful, and are a wonderful means of providing friendship, fellowship and sometimes a way into the church. Sometimes those who have brought children to the parent and toddler group and then to the playgroup have asked if we would mind them sending their children to SALT which is our Sunday School. Some of these parents have been attracted into our services, enjoyed the experience of worship and have come to personal faith in Christ.

Thirdly, we realised that when it came to outreach there was a lot of potential in working with families again both within the church and in the community. This led to the appointment of a Family Worker about three years ago. This was with a desire to help people develop parenting and family skills, and to bolster the institution of marriage within our community. Many of the referrals to our Family Worker deal with un-churched people, and whilst we also help church members through this post, we see it as enhancing community outreach as well. For example as most of our attendees at the parent and toddler group are un-churched this has given us another pool to fish in.

Fourthly, as we have been seeking the Lord's vision for the way forward in the church we have come to accept the five purposes of the church as being Worship, Fellowship, Evangelism, Discipleship and Ministry. Therefore as we had separate sub groups of the Kirk Session for Evangelism and Social Action, we amalgamated those groups under the title of Outreach. This was our recognition as an eldership that we dare not separate evangelism from social action. Certainly there may be different emphases.

The playgroup will not have the same overt evangelistic thrust as we have with a disused fire station our young adults are using for street evangelism, but all ultimately have the same aim of introducing people to personal faith in Jesus Christ.

Fifthly, as our understanding of working in community has developed, we have had a burden for a local housing estate where we believe there are real social and spiritual needs. How do you break into an area on your doorstep where there is paramilitary influence and an apathy to the church and gospel? Through contacts made by our Family Worker we were led to ask the Housing Executive for the use of two vacant derelict shops in the middle of the estate. These have been granted to us and we hope to have them refurbished and open by Spring 2001. We are as I write, in the process of working out a partnership with Kirkpatrick Memorial in whose parish the estate is.

Together we are developing links with two other Christian agencies, Belfast City Mission and the City of Belfast YMCA, one more associated with straight evangelism, the other with a track record in social action. Also we have included representatives of the community and sounded out the people of the area as to what they would like us to do with the premises. Their priorities would be a parent and toddler group, some IT training and work with young people, perhaps an after school club. We envisage a centre that will be opened for these things, including the preaching of the gospel and Bible studies. Interestingly, above the premises is a UVF sign whose slogan would be anathema to our church ethos. This is a reminder to us that one of our long term goals must be single identity work to enable us to engage with that side of Protestant culture. We have no right to ask for this sign to be taken down until we build a relationship with the people who put it there. In this way some of our evangelism will be a slow building of relationship that earns the right to speak of our faith in Christ and the difference he makes to our lives. In this project we need to be 'in' the community to win them for Christ. If we can do that through social action then God will be honoured.

These are some of the ways our congregation has embarked on a journey of discovering evangelism and social action as two sides of the same coin. We have not lessened our commitment to the preaching of the gospel, indeed in recognising evangelism as one of the core purposes of the church, we are keeping that priority to the fore. This has led for example to running ALPHA courses. These have been very beneficial, and our husband and wife team of administrators have had the encouragement of seeing conversions and lives changed as God has worked through the course. ALPHA is just one of several courses a church could use, but I believe all of us should be offering something like this

to enquirers. The genius of the course is quite simple. It fits with our more relational culture, empowers people to ask questions and think through important issues, and doesn't pressurise people into making hasty commitments. Also the gospel is not watered down from the pulpit, but (hopefully!!) communicated in a relevant and practical way. Our journey into social action has not weakened our evangelistic ethos, rather strengthened and broadened our approach, and the number of opportunities to share the gospel.

The beauty of developing evangelism and social action in tandem is that it increases the opportunities for people with different gifts to be involved. We need those who can preach, those who can share their faith and lead others in personal commitment to Christ. But we also need those who can bake, or help someone learn to use a computer, or to put out toys and tables and chairs. These ministries should dovetail into one great purpose of making Jesus known through all we do.

As I draw these thoughts to some sort of conclusion may I suggest the following?

- 1 Recognise the amount of social action you already do as an individual and congregation, and see how you can improve on it.
- 2 Recognise the Biblical mandate for including social action and evangelism together as seen in the ministry of Jesus and Scripture as a whole.
- 3 Pray for new ways to open up again personally or congregationally to serve the Lord and the people of your community.
- 4 Seek to discover who in your congregation is already working in the community and give them prayerful and practical support.
- 5 Encourage your members to see their Christian witness taking place wherever they work, and by being involved in community things like Parent/Teacher Associations, or through charity work or Trade Union activity, or work in the media for example. If we imprison people in a church sub-culture that rules them out of working in community as a witness to Christ, then we can stifle and strangle the power of the gospel.

One final thought. The very essence of the gospel is relationship. God is unity in Trinity, and our faith is expressed in terms of love for God and loving our neighbour as ourselves. Social action therefore is not an optional extra for the church or an addendum to evangelism. They really are two sides of the same coin. We must therefore be involved with our communities if we ever want to win them to faith in Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord.

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CHAPTER 4

Rendering unto Caesar: The Christian, the Church and Politics

Dr Esmond Birnie, MLA

Introduction

Meaningful involvement in the community will almost inevitably involve political activity. This then prompts several questions. For example, how far should individuals, including Christians, be involved in the political process? And what role should the church play in this sphere?

This contribution seeks to answer such questions in a number of ways. First, by tracing what may be a general decline in participation in democratic politics. Second, by outlining the principles which suggest Christians should be involved. Third, by providing an outline of Presbyterian and reformed thinking and practice in this area. Fourth, by reviewing and evaluating the various approaches to political decision making which Christians have used. Fifth, by a stab at applying Christian principles to some of the painful dilemmas inherent in current Northern Ireland and Irish politics.

Background: A crisis of democratic politics

Christian political involvement takes place against a background in which Western or representative democracy is in something of a crisis. After the defeat of Hitler in 1945 and then the “victory” over Communism in 1989 it might have been thought that democracy would be in pretty good shape. However, in some ways this is not so.

In country after country opinion surveys show that public confidence in politicians continues to drop. Politicians in countries such as Britain, the Republic of Ireland, Italy, Germany and the USA have been perceived as unusually prone to financial or sexual scandal. Turn-out figures in Northern Ireland elections, especially in “Protestant areas” and east of the Bann generally, have been decreasing for some time now. What is less well appreciated is that voting is a declining habit across most of the democratic world. Half a century ago the Conservative and Labour Parties had millions of members. Today, however, people are much more likely to find their entertainment through fishing, drinking or watching the TV rather than through attending political meetings. If they have a sense of public service, they may join a charity or pressure group.

It is open to debate whether such a shift away from party politics to pressure groups is a good or a bad thing (as an elected representative, I tend to think the latter!). What is certain is that the numerical decline in traditional political activism, like the decline in church membership, has been happening for some time now. This situation does, however, offer an opportunity to Christians because the implication is that even if a

relatively small number of Christians were to become politically active this could have immense consequences. The next section attempts to tackle the question whether Christians should in fact get involved.

Why Christians should be politically active

As a general rule Christians should vote. I also think they would be performing a valid and valuable Christian witness and service if some, perhaps many, were to join a political party. Modern, representative democracy did not exist at the time of the Old and New Testament so, obviously, I cannot give direct Biblical mandate for these propositions. However, I think the following principles are relevant to this issue and can legitimately be derived from the Bible (for a very helpful summary of the issues see Paul Miller, *Into The Arena Why Christians should be Politically Involved*, (1992) Kingsway, Eastbourne):

1. Christians have a duty to promote the general good of society (Matt. 5:13-16, Jer. 29:7). Voting, party membership and holding office can, at their best, be public services. Whilst some Christian traditions have professed the advantages of separation from the political sphere, I suspect it is impossible to apply separation consistently (if Christians refuse to vote should they not also refuse to pay tax and benefit from any form of government spending?).
2. Christians have a responsibility to use well any privileges given to them by God; "... from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked" (Lk. 12:48). A degree of individual influence, even if small, over the political destiny of one's country could be one such privilege.
3. Christians should help to keep the democratic political system working. This is not because that system is perfect but because that system is compatible with a number of Old Testament principles of good government. For example, that decision making should be decentralised (Ex. 18:21-23) and that rulers should themselves be under the law (Deut. 17:18-20; 2 Sam. 12:7-12; 1 Kgs. 21:19-20).
4. When Paul wrote that famous passage (Rom. 13:1-7) about the, "powers that be", as God's ministers or "magistrates" he would have been thinking of the emperors and kings of his day. Under today's political condition there is a sense in which we are all as potential voters God's magistrates to some degree. We must exercise our position responsibly.

In addition to these arguments, there are some further factors specific to their own theological tradition which might sway Irish Presbyterians into being politically active.

Many historians would recognise *some* link between sixteenth-eighteenth century Presbyterianism/Calvinism and the development of representative government in countries such as Switzerland, Netherlands, England, Scotland and the USA. This is the traditional or Whig view of early modern history. It was expressed, for example in

Lord Macaulay's and Winston Churchill's histories. The Whig historians are much criticised today but they still have their adherents.

True, for all of their undoubted heroism when they themselves were persecuted, the Scottish covenanters during their period of power in 1645-51 did not show themselves friendly to the development of religious liberty as they sought to implement the Westminster Confession of Faith through use of legislative muscle. While the eighteenth century philosopher Professor Francis Hutcheson, originally a Presbyterian Minister from County Down, pioneered the idea of government by consent, his beliefs may have owed more to an early Enlightenment optimism about human nature than traditional theology (that said, there is Old Testament precedent for a covenantal relationship between rulers and the ruled; 2 Kgs. 11:17).

At the same time, a decentralised system of church government and the *election* of elders probably did incline people to similar practices in politics (Acts 14:23 *may* indicate that elders were being elected in the New Testament church). Presbyterians frequently opposed arbitrary government by monarchs such as the Stuarts in the British Isles and the Hanoverians in the then American Colonies. Hence Charles II's response, "Presbyterianism is no religion for a gentleman". There obviously was *some* Presbyterian input to the ideals of the 1798 United Irishman rising and some of this later transformed itself into strands of radical or liberal unionism (notably Thomas Sinclair, who provided a non-Tory and non-Orange critique of Home Rule). Strangely, though not inappropriately, there may be a link between the Reformed doctrine of election and political election. If all human beings are on the same level relative to God and if salvation owes all to his grace and nothing to our merits, then this may give a powerful impulse to an egalitarian and democratic way of looking at the world.

An early nineteenth century British Prime Minister Lord Melbourne said, "things have come to a pretty pass when religion is allowed to invade public life". The time has come for such an invasion. However, before we can mount such an invasion we will have to think more clearly about how Christians should go about making political judgements.

Christian political decision making: Evaluating alternative approaches

There are at least three possible approaches to Christian decision making in politics.

The first is to argue that Christians do not know more than anyone else. By implication, decisions would be left to "the experts". It is true that church ministers/leaders are not necessarily well qualified to give advice on all aspects of political and economic policies. At the same time, experts outside of the churches in areas such as health care or law reform are often driven by their own agenda (often an non/anti-Christian one). Thus this approach can be a bit of a white flag of surrender from the point of view of exercising any meaningful Christian influence in public life.

A second approach would be to claim that Christians should support only those political policies which can be backed by a specific text from the Bible. This approach would *seem* thoroughly evangelical. It has for example been seen amongst some groups in

the USA (e.g. the so-called theonomists or reconstructionists, who argue that it is both right and feasible to apply virtually all Biblical laws today).

However, there is a big problem with this theonomic approach. The Bible relates to events which occurred 2000-4000 years ago. Thus, many “modern” political issues will not be explicitly mentioned in the Bible, e.g. unemployment benefit, National Health Service, nuclear power stations, even, and notably, the Belfast (or, as some prefer, the Good Friday) Agreement.

The third approach is that we should take from the Bible timeless principles. This approach, the one I favour, fully respects the Bible as inspired by God and as a reliable guide to all aspects of our life and faith. One therefore seeks to find in it principles for action which are always relevant and then apply these to modern conditions (which, of course, can be radically different to those existing in the time of King David or the Apostle Paul).

For example, in the Old Testament and Mosaic Laws there were “gleaning laws” (Lev. 19:9,10). The Israelites were not to gather the crops lying around the edge of fields. I think we can deduce from this that it is right that in modern societies there should be adequate provision for the helpless poor. Any use of the Bible to imply principles for modern politics needs a health warning attached. All such applications are provisional. The original Biblical text is divinely inspired but not the application which is done by a very fallible human being. The reader should bear this qualification in mind as we turn to some matters specific to the Irish situation.

Specific approaches to political decision making in Ireland

As an Irish Presbyterian, and also as an elected representative, I have sometimes felt that I have had to struggle on two fronts at once. On the one hand, there has traditionally been a perception within much of Ulster evangelicalism and Reformed Protestantism that unionism *necessarily* follows from evangelical Christianity. On the other hand, more recently there has been a definite mood in Northern Ireland evangelical circles that Christian faith and a strong unionist political commitment are incompatible.

I do not subscribe to either of these positions. We have been granted God-given powers of rational choice. To my mind, the weight of the arguments still point in favour of Northern Ireland’s continued place within the UK. This is a different proposition from saying a particular constitutional point of view follows directly and inevitably from faith and the Bible. For more detail on how I think we might apply the Bible today see the Appendix on the vexed question of the “unrighteous” in government.

Politics inevitably involves difficult choices. The decisions finally made should always be qualified by the following considerations:

- (a) Inappropriate certitude needs to be avoided. The fanatic never considers he or she could be wrong. It is worth remembering Cromwell’s statement, “I beseech thee in the bowels of Christ think it possible ye may be wrong”.

- (b) Where circumstances change there need be no shame and no dishonour in changing policy. History is full of great statesmen who had to shift their policy position to meet the challenge of new circumstances (e.g. Lincoln on Slavery, Wilson and Roosevelt on America's involvement in European wars, Churchill on Communist Russia).
- (c) We live in a fallen world. Strive for perfection but do not expect to attain it before the Lord returns. In the Northern Ireland context devolution along with decommissioning is, I submit, a great prize. However, even if it is achieved, this will not magic away the many problems facing Northern Ireland. The Biblical millennium of perfect peace and justice would not be heralded. In short, the Christian in politics has to live with the tension between what is now and what is yet to come. This is hardly surprising because such a tension characterises the entire Christian life (e.g. Phil. 3:12-14).

Appendix

I recognise that many Christians, including many in the Presbyterian and Reformed camp, feel that current government arrangements in Northern Ireland are so irredeemably flawed in moral terms that my discussion of Christian political involvement may seem to be missing the point completely. Their concern is largely that the four-party involuntary coalition arrangement under the Belfast Agreement implies “[unrepentant?] terrorists in government”. This view *could* be right but I submit that another position can be derived from Biblical principles. The following case study illustrates this:

A case study: The objection to the “unrighteous” in government

- The Old Testament is full of condemnations of unrighteous and unjust governments (e.g. Ezek. 45:9, Prov. 16:2, 25:5, Is. 54:14). Hence, some evangelical Christians object to the presence of the two Sinn Fein Ministers in the Northern Ireland Executive.
- However, consider Joab, clearly a murderer (2 Sam. 3:30), indeed, several times over. Nevertheless, David decided to retain him as general. *This seems to have been a pragmatic political judgement.* (Joab was eventually executed but only much later, under Solomon, under a new set of political circumstances; 1 Kings 2:28-34).
- Perhaps David was simply being weak and sinful or was he being prudent? We could consider also the example of David himself (after adultery with Bathsheba, the murder of Uriah etc.; 2 Sam. 12:13-14) and King Manasseh (2 Chr. 33); the most blood thirsty Jewish tyrant of the Old Testament and yet also the one who was permitted by God to reign the longest (was he therefore an early example of “a repentant terrorist in government”?).

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CHAPTER 5

The Paradox of Prosperity

This is an extract from The Paradox of Prosperity, an independent report prepared for the Salvation Army by the Henley Centre (1999). It is published with the permission of the Salvation Army.

Family Breakdown

Significant factors contributing to family breakdown are the growing pressures of work and the pursuit of material gains. Women, in particular, consider that they have sacrificed the chance of having children or even forming relationships for the sake of their career. Men, on the other hand, are more likely to miss out on a home life due to short- or long-term work travel. Existing families are sacrificed in the same cause of putting work before family. A significant number of men and women believe they have missed their children growing up, or even blame work pressures for their divorce or other strains on relationships.

Figure 8: The high cost of work ("What is the single biggest personal sacrifice in your home life you have made in your career so far?" %)

	Men	Women
Missed children growing up	23.7	22.2
Work put before family	23.8	21.3
Moving home for employer	10.8	4.0
Missed leisure/hobby time	7.0	15.7
Away from home, short term	8.9	3.1
Divorce/strain on relationship	7.1	7.3
Away from home, long term	4.7	1.3
Time spent on work-related education	2.7	2.5
Not having/postponing children	1.2	1.2
Unable to form relationships	1.2	3.7

Source: WFD/ManagementToday: The Great Work/Life Debate 1998

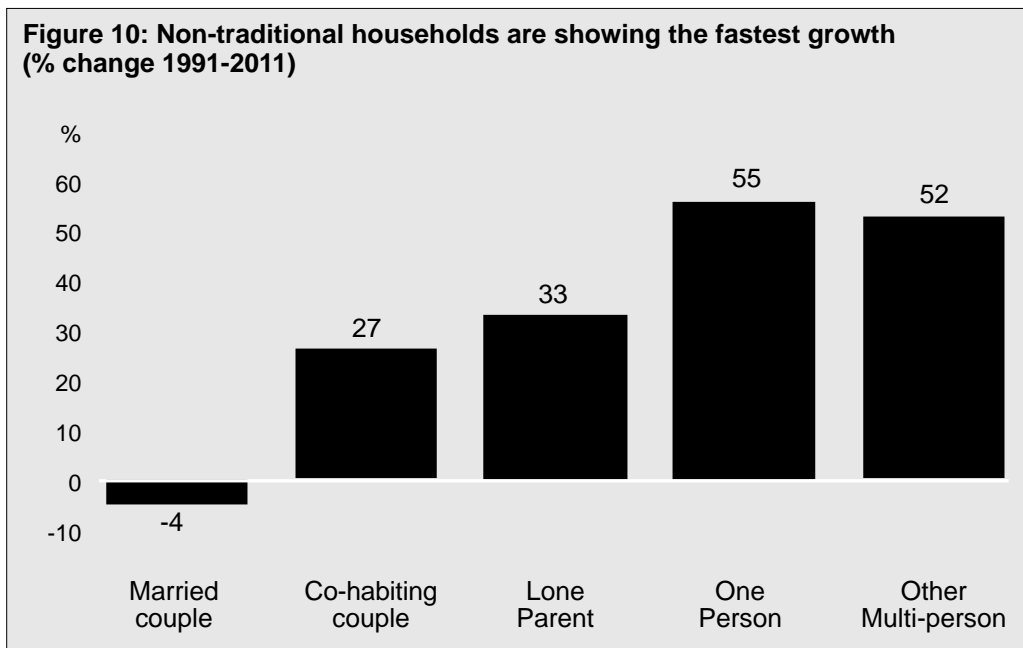
Interestingly, most people still aspire to the traditional norms of family life. When asked, "Which do you think is the most desirable way to live?", an overwhelming majority (69%) considered it was to be married with children (*Source: Nestle Family Monitor, 1998*). However, the evidence shows that an increasing number of people are failing in this aspiration. The number of divorces is fast catching up with the number of first marriages in the UK. A third of marriages now end in divorce after 10 years.

- People now seem resigned to marriage breakdown, with 28% believing it is “very likely” that, in the next five to ten years, it will be much more common for people to get married several times in the course of their life.



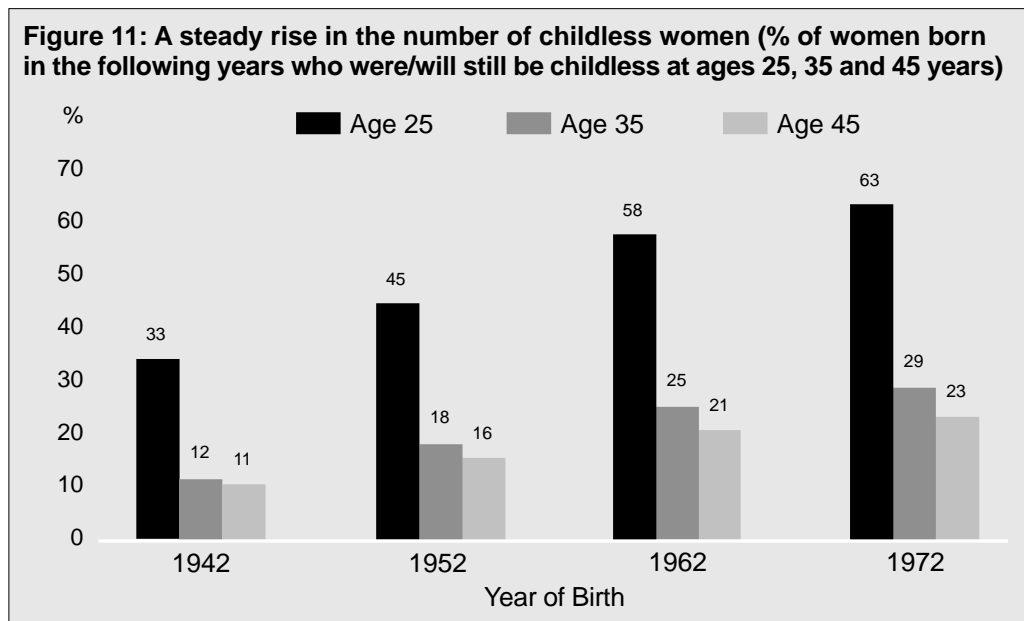
Source: ONS; Social Trends 1999

Two in five marriages end in divorce
36% of all marriages are re-marriages
25% of all divorces are re-divorces
21% of all families with dependent children are single parents
 Source: ONS: Special Focus on Families



Source: Department of the Environment; The Henley Centre 1999

In future, fewer people will form their own families. As well as a fall in marriage in favour of co-habitation, there will be an increasing number of one-person households, partly as a result of more people remaining single. More women are also remaining childless – of all women born in 1972, 23% are expected to remain childless at 45 years old (in 2017).



Source: ONS; *Social Trends*, 1999
(projections for 35-year-olds in '72 and 45-year-olds from '62)

Many other societal problems can be traced back to family breakdown, and as such, this will continue to be one of the major issues we must face up to in the next ten years. Children can suffer varying degrees of neglect due to their parents' long, stressful working hours, or to divorce. In addition, homeless children are frequently the product of broken homes or unhappy step-family lives. These children may lack the role-models (especially male role-models) and the moral guidance that a stable family unit is able to provide. For this reason, parental neglect and loosening family ties are blamed for being major influences on crime and violence, proving again the universal relevance of these sort of problems. In fact, 42% of people say they feel at significant risk from 'youngsters hanging around', a figure which has almost doubled since 1990 (*Source: The Henley Centre: Planning for Consumer Change 2000*).

The fact that dysfunctional family life can often be a 'hereditary' phenomenon with history repeating itself through generations is a further cause for concern and does not bode well for our situation in 2010. The challenge will be to break this cycle, or at least to ease its troublesome side-effects.

Figure 12: Perceived major influences on crime and violence, %

Lack of parental discipline over children	66
Drugs	56
Unemployment	39
Alcohol abuse	22
People less involved in their community's life	17
Loosening family ties	16

Source: *The Henley Centre: Planning for Consumer Change 2000*

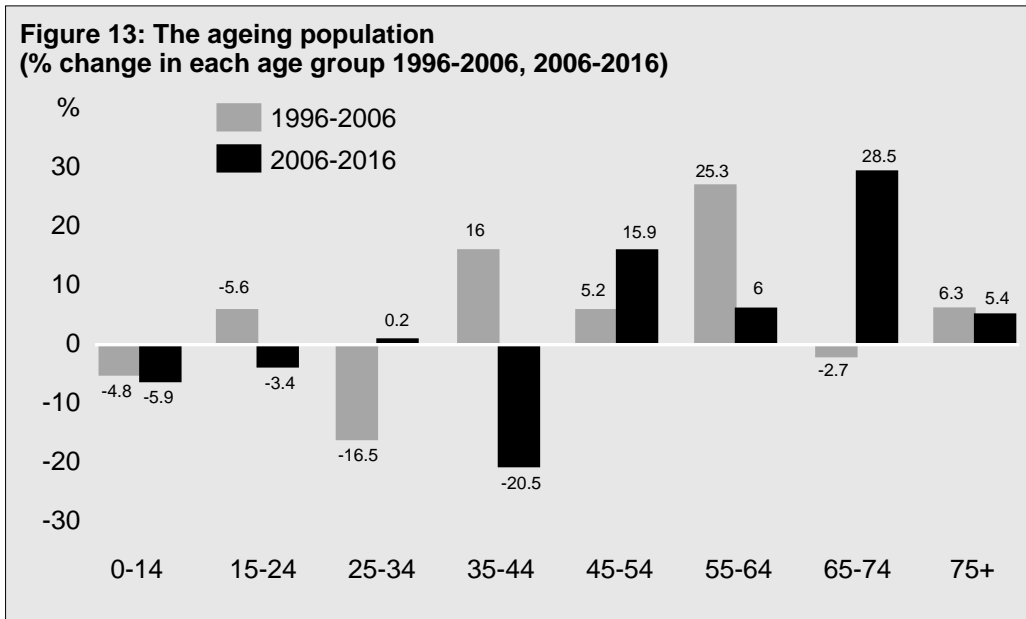
One of these side-effects, which operates at a more personal level, is the loneliness that results from fragmentation of families or exclusion from family life. 17% of people are very worried about being lonely, and this is a particular problem for the elderly, as we will see in the section overleaf.

Summary of family breakdown

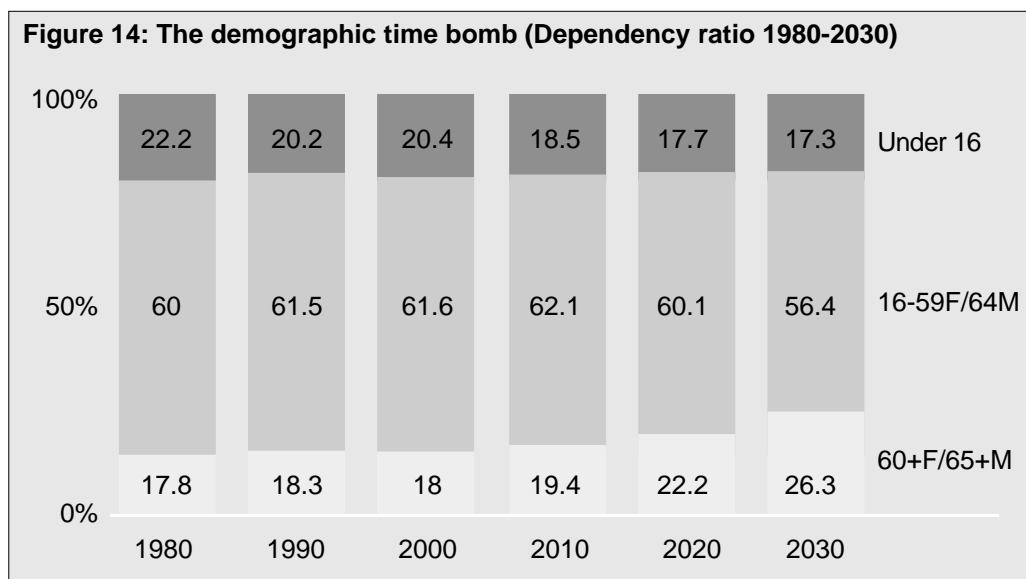
- Increasing working hours and associated pressures will impact upon the family:
 - fewer people will form families
 - there will be a 33% increase in lone-parent households and a 55% increase in one-person households by 2011 (measured from 1991)
 - by 2010, around 22% of 45-year-old women will remain childless, compared with 16% in 1997
- Other societal problems which can be traced back to family breakdown are likely to see a corresponding increase, eg child neglect, homelessness, loneliness, fear of crime
- Dysfunctional family life tends to be hereditary, which means that these problems are likely to continue into the next generation

Ageing Population

Discussions about the 'ageing population' usually centre on the 'demographic time-bomb' which is forecast to cause a pensions crisis from 2020 onwards. By this time, those born during the post-war population boom will have reached retirement age, but there will be a reduction in the number of tax-payers of working age. In Britain, this is less of a problem for the taxpayer than elsewhere in Europe, because there the value of the state pension has been allowed to fall relative to the incomes of those in work. Britain faces the opposite problem – the potential for large numbers of people retiring on low incomes. Those most at risk are those who have not been able to secure an adequate personal or occupational pension.



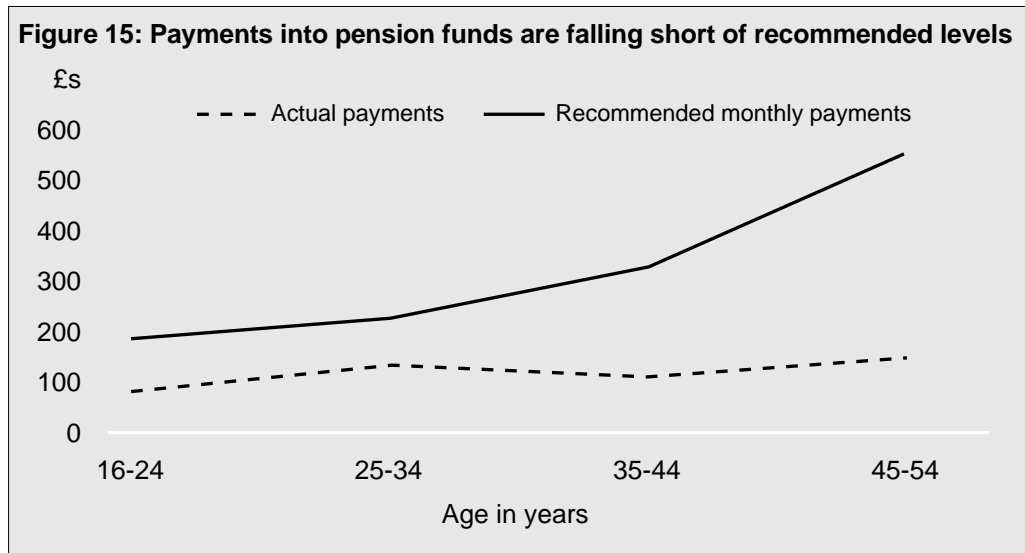
Source: Government Actuary 1998; The Henley Centre



Source: Henley Centre analysis of OPCS data

Although the demographic time-bomb will not reach its full impact until 2030 and beyond, long-term care of the elderly will have become a major policy issue well before then, especially as it is estimated that people’s current pension contributions fall well below the level required to secure their comfortable future. This could potentially result in a reduced standard of living for many – particularly dangerous if there has been a significant extension of privatised healthcare and nursing homes. 55% of people are already worried that they will not have enough money on which to retire (Source: *The Henley Centre: Planning for Consumer Change 2000*).

The problem is exacerbated through the additional dimension of increased life expectancy. This means that, if people cannot fund themselves through a longer period of retirement, they will have to postpone their retirement age. In the US, some are already lobbying to raise the retirement age to seventy, and it is possible this campaign could be taken up in the UK too. Whilst this may ease the pensions burden, it could also result in more of the pressure and stress associated with working life, as described above.



Source: *Barclay's Life*

However, the ageing population is not simply an economic issue. Those who can afford to take early retirement may not be ready to sink into inactive dependency. Longer life-expectancy also means that a new sub-section of 'old people' is emerging. These are the 'young old' as opposed to the 'frail old'. These people can and want to continue making a contribution to society, and this contribution should be better utilised and appreciated. With time on their hands, older people can deliver valuable assistance in voluntary services, and in doing so, they retain their dignity and sense of worth, and find a level of fulfilment that is as important as financial security.

Another issue which supersedes financial well-being (but can be especially lethal when combined with it) is that old age can be made miserable through loneliness. This links to our previous discussion of family breakdown, entailing a loss of the traditional networks of family support. The obligation to look after one's parents in old age will be less recognised by future generations, for a number of reasons:

- People may lack the time or money to look after their parents, especially if they are the generation caught in the 'care sandwich', who are looking after their own children, making private provision for their future welfare, and still paying taxes towards their parents' welfare. 19% of people now admit that they feel worried they might have to look after a member of their family in his/her old age. (Source: *The Henley Centre: Planning for Consumer Change 2000*).

- The geographical dispersal of families, often due to work mobility, can also cause old people to lose regular contact with their families.
- Marriage breakdown will further weaken family ties: will the children of divorced couples stay in touch with their fathers? Equally, will they be prepared to care for their ex-mothers-in-law? Elderly men, in particular, will find they have no one to look after them in later life as they tend not to establish the same bonds with their family that women do.
- If people have chosen not to marry and/or have children, then family support in old age will not even be an option.

“As I’ve got older and my parents have become very infirm, I’ve suddenly realised I’m caring for them additionally. It’s complete role reversal, and I am actually caring for every member of the family including the extended family. I was really angry – this sounds so mean – but I planned to go to the gym on Monday. My mother had a fall on Monday morning, and so my Dad rings me, and that’s my whole week blotted out, and I just thought aaah ... And I’ve three older brothers – two of them are in the local vicinity, but he doesn’t phone them he phones me...”

Verbatim from consumer research, Planning for Consumer Change 2000

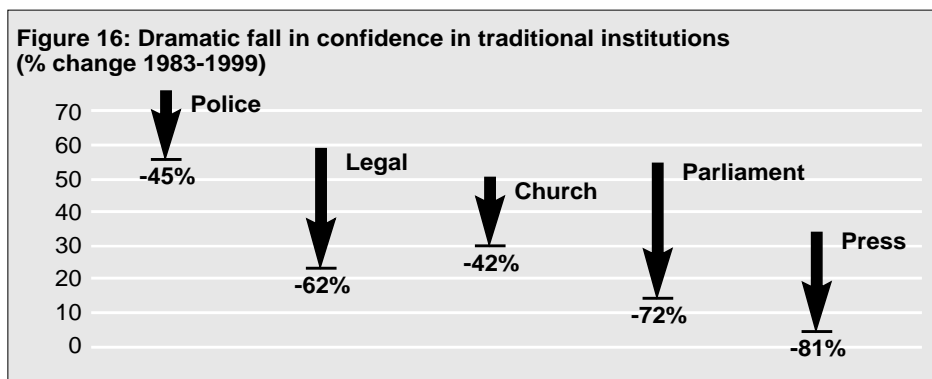
Summary of the ageing population

- By 2010, those retiring on the state pension, or on an under-funded personal pension, could experience a dangerously reduced standard of living.
- A generation of people currently in middle-age will form a particularly vulnerable ‘care sandwich’, which requires them to look after their own children and pay taxes towards their parents’ welfare, whilst also making private provision for their own old age.
- A new generation of ‘active’ old will have time on their hands and will be seeking to play an increased role in society.
- Family breakdown will mean that the traditional support system for elderly people will be lost, resulting in greater social exclusion and loneliness. This will be especially serious for those already trying to manage on a low retirement income.

The emergence of new ‘spirituality’

The sort of problems associated with family breakdown and the ageing population can be traced back to the competitive materialism by which we live, or to its accompanying inequalities. Even beyond their personal circumstances and problems, people are beginning to question whether economic growth engenders equivalent progress in terms of morality or values. In particular, the social paradigm of scientific and technological progress has been undermined by its apparent failure to provide solutions. Diseases

such as TB have reappeared, largely due to overuse of antibiotics; genetically modified foods raise new potential risks; a technological masterpiece, the mobile phone, becomes the subject of the latest cancer scare. It is not surprising that 40% of people feel that 'Britain, as a place, is getting worse' and a further 33% believe it is staying the same, rather than improving (Source: MORI, 1998). This cynicism felt towards scientific solutions is a symptom of a general decline in faith in traditional sources of authority. Major institutions such as the police, Parliament, the legal system and the Church no longer command people's automatic respect and confidence, and are therefore unable to assuage people's fears about personal or societal risks. The breakdown of this old order leaves a trust vacuum and exacerbates people's feelings of uncertainty and vulnerability.



Source: The Henley Centre, *Planning for Social Change; Planning for Consumer Change*

Given the problems and concerns described above – family breakdown, ageing population and the overarching ‘paradox of prosperity’ – together with the loss of trust in traditional institutions to address these issues, there is growing demand for some sort of alternative approach to life, for new answers to old questions. This has led to the emergence of a renewed emphasis on spirituality. There is recognition that true ‘wealth’ comes from spiritual as much as material sources, and people are drawing up an alternative scale of ‘value’ that will restore meaning to their lives. 27% of people claim to have successfully changed their spiritual life and a further 20% would like to do so (Source: The Henley Centre: *Planning for Consumer Change 2000*). However, this is not necessarily a narrowly defined spirituality that adopts the tenets of organised religion.

72% of people now believe that “Religion no longer provides the answers to many of today’s problems”, with 33% of them agreeing ‘a great deal’ with this statement.

Only 20% of people claim they generally agree with what the Church or religious leaders have to say, a figure lower than that given to radio stations, magazines, books and work colleagues. Only the government scores worse!

A mere 12% believe that the Church or religious leaders have quite a lot of influence on what they think and do

Source: The Henley Centre, *Planning for Consumer Change 2000*

The 'spirituality' that is seen as more relevant is found in a variety of shapes and forms, many of which are directed towards inner development or ethical lifestyles: yoga; self-help and counselling; aromatherapy and feng shui; ethical investment trusts – all of these have found a place in our language or our lifestyles. The number of alternative health practitioners in the UK has now actually overtaken the number of GPs. Recently, there has been a visible accommodation of multi-cultural influences, including Eastern religions, Chinese medicine and even the definition of health, which is now changing from 'not ill' to 'general mental and physical well-being'.

This looser sense of 'health' fits well with the looser sense of 'spirituality', as was suggested in a recent report by the Centre for Policy on Ageing. The report's author believes that, even where an elderly person has no religious belief, a 'spiritual dimension' should be included in their care to improve their well-being and to preserve their sense of value.

Our search for meaning does not, however, imply that we want a belief system to be dictated to us. The essence of our 'post-modern' age is the denial of a single Truth, along with the assembly and adoption of different influences in an experimentally 'pick 'n' mix' fashion. In the current period of transition, 'alternative' values and practices are frequently synthesised with conventional, scientific ones. For example, Great Ormond Street Hospital has a Chinese herbalist.

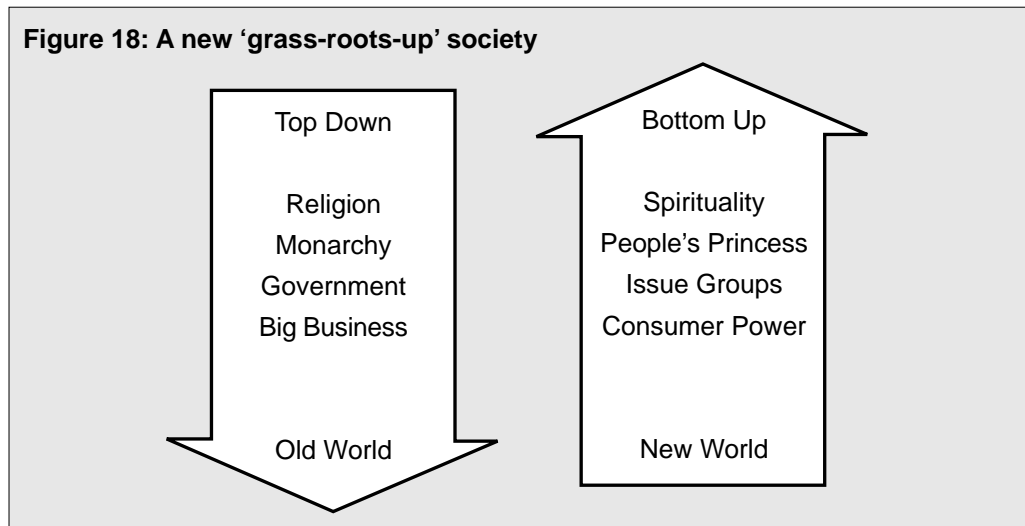
Figure 17: % of people who feel they have a lot or a fair amount in common with other people who...

Like the same music as you	42%
Enjoy the same film as you	32%
Are the same nationality as you	31%
Read the same magazines as you	27%
Went to the same school as you	23%
Support the same sports teams as you	22%
Go on holiday to the same places as you	22%
Have the same religious beliefs as you	21%

Source: *The Henley Centre: Planning for Consumer Change 2000*

The same 'pick 'n' mix' approach can be applied to religious beliefs. Interestingly, only 21% of people consider that they have a lot or a fair amount in common with other people who share their religious beliefs. 18% state that they have 'virtually nothing' in common. This demonstrates that, despite some hardening of religious fundamentalism, a counter-trend is growing whereby religion has become more of a personal initiative than a group identity. People have become used to negotiating their own terms in other areas of their life – as consumers, as employees, even as children against their parents. As figure 18 shows, this can be represented as a transition from 'old world' to 'new world' themes, one aspect of which is the transition from organised 'religion' to popular

'spirituality'. Therefore traditional religious institutions which try to command allegiance are rejected in favour of grass roots activity and 'build-your-own' religion. To some extent, this has resulted in greater fragmentation, with new religious movements emerging all the time. On the other hand, it has also broken down barriers between different religions, so that religious identity has become far more blurred.



Source: *The Henley Centre*

As an extreme example, a person could feasibly adapt various elements from Christianity, Buddhism or even perhaps voodoo, into a personalised set of beliefs and practices. In the next ten years, this trend towards religious pluralism and pliability is likely to continue. This is well-represented by the 'spiritual zone' within the Millennium dome, which presents Christianity as part of Britain's history, but appears to devote most of its space to a mixture of other faiths.

Although the renewed search for meaning represents an opportunity for the Church, it must recognise that it is competing with any number of other options to fill this 'spiritual' gap. Just as commercial organisations have had to take account of a wider competitive set amidst an environment of diversification, the Church must also avoid complacency. Whatever their background, people are now as likely to turn to Buddhism, yoga classes or even self-hypnosis as to organised Christianity. In order to secure a place in people's lives as we enter the next millennium, the Church will need to put its credentials on the table, offering a greater degree of flexibility to accommodate people's needs and preferences. Evidence that it has already absorbed this lesson can be seen in new figures measuring people's trust in traditional institutions. Whereas certain institutions such as the legal system and the press continue to fall in the public's estimation, others such as the royal family and, notably, the Church, have regained ground. Whilst this may, in the case of the Church, be partly due to the general revival in 'spirituality' it could perhaps also be linked with the increasing willingness to listen and adapt to people's changing needs.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Norman Chambers

The preceding chapters have set out more than a Biblical rationale for community engagement, social action and participation by Christians in the political process. Sir Fred Catherwood sees engagement with the community as a *Biblical imperative* and he argues cogently that a series of social and political experiments by successive administrations, underpinned by secular humanistic philosophy, have failed miserably.

Both Sir Fred and Norman Hamilton argue a Biblical and theological case for Christian social action, both as complementary to evangelism and as being valid in its own right. While the Code of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland appears to endorse this view and places a responsibility on its Social Witness Board “to concern itself with all matters affecting the welfare of the church and the community” (paragraph 281), evidence suggests that many individuals and congregations see social witness or social action as tangential to mission. Norman Hamilton acknowledges that the perception of the church by the non-church attending community as being uncaring and detached from the reality of many people’s everyday experience carries more than a grain of truth. He advances the view that the Protestant Reformed church must relearn the art of community, mutuality and interdependence.

Ken McBride’s account of how the Orangefield congregation is changing in its relationship to the wider community may not be of seismic proportions, and some may retort that his congregation is better placed than most to fund experimentation. Perhaps it is, but one should not underestimate the pain that even the changes he describes can inflict on any congregation that is wedded to a view of congregational life that favours the recreation of the past. Orangefield has been courageous, not only in reflecting on its traditional theological assumptions, but in recognising that it must and can relate differently to its ‘neighbours’.

Esmond Birnie articulates the case for the Christian to be a political activist and he is honest enough to acknowledge the discomfort he experiences with political compromise, especially when pragmatism infers moral or ethical ambiguity. His is an ample response to the challenges presented by Sir Fred Catherwood and Norman Hamilton that Christians cannot sit on the sidelines and leave society and the political process to the mercy of secular humanism.

The extract from *The Paradox of Prosperity* is part of an economic and social analysis of contemporary experience of people living in the United Kingdom. Prosperity is indeed paradoxical in its impacts and the social divide between those who benefit most and those who benefit little, if at all, from economic growth is of scandalous proportions. Is this the consequence of failed political and social experimentation, or have Christian

leaders failed to recognise how monumental the disaster is; has the church successfully ring-fenced itself and ceased to be salt, or light?

Finally, the quest for 'spirituality' is not dead. But new forms of multi-faith experience are taking the place of institutionalised religion that is failing to impact on the lives of individuals and on society. People still look for 'stars' and for answers to the same old questions of 'why' and 'who' and 'how'?

Perhaps the encouragement one finds in this booklet is that genuine Christianity is highly relevant, powerful and transforming, if we could only practice it the way He intended.

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