

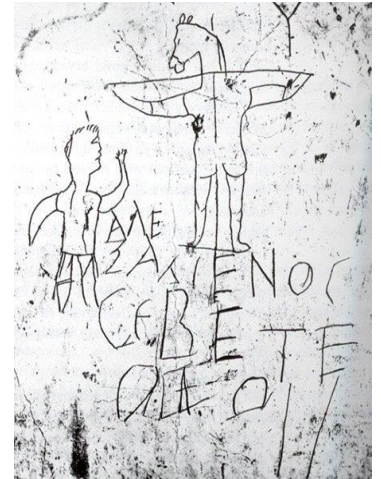
# Maintenance or Mission?

## *Missional Church Thinking*

3<sup>rd</sup> edition © 2013, Paul Coulter ([www.paulcoulter.net](http://www.paulcoulter.net))

### What's the issue?

The earliest known pictorial representation of Jesus on the cross is found in a piece of graffiti carved into the wall of a house near the Palatine hill in Rome some time in the second century AD. The image (shown to the right) depicts a man, probably a Roman soldier, standing with his hand raised, probably indicating worship. He is looking up to a figure on a cross, but the strange thing is that this figure has the body of a man but the head of a donkey. The idea that Christians and Jews worshipped a donkey-headed God was widespread in the ancient world. Although it is difficult to establish why, the image is certainly intended to mock and insult. Underneath the image is a Greek inscription translated 'Alexamenos worships god'. This image is a fascinating insight into the situation for Christians in the earliest centuries after Christ. They were a misunderstood and mocked minority within a pagan world – one idea amongst many. Yet they were noticed. Their devotion to a crucified man whom they worshipped as God was radically new and their lifestyle provoked a response.



Stuart Murray opens his book *Post-Christendom* with the following two 'Snapshots of Post-Christendom':

In a London school a teenager with no church connections hears the Christmas story for the first time. His teacher tells it well and he is fascinated by this amazing story. Risking his friends' mockery, after the lesson he thanks her for the story. One thing had disturbed him, so he asks: 'Why did they give the baby a swear word for his name?'

One Sunday in Oxford a man visits a church building to collect something for his partner who works during the week in a creative-arts project the church runs. He arrives as the morning congregation is leaving and recognises the minister, whom he knows. Surprised, he asks: 'What are all these people doing here? I didn't know churches were open on Sundays!'

Murray doesn't reference these stories but I assume they are true, and if they aren't then I'm sure we can imagine that they could happen in contemporary Britain. Readers from Northern Ireland, where I live and minister, might immediately think, 'But that's over there; it's not as bad here'. There is some justification in that statement, but no room for complacency. I will comment specifically on the situation in Northern Ireland in a later section of this paper. What these two anecdotes are intended to show us is that there are people in contemporary Europe who are just as ignorant of and confused by the Christian message as the friends of Alexamenos. For them the message of a crucified man who is God and Lord is foreign, intriguing and provocative. Meanwhile there is the church, which for many is just as foreign but less intriguing and seldom provocative, except with it appears to pontificate on moral matters, telling people who don't recognise its authority how they should live their lives. For some it is a relic of the past; for others a dangerous institution harbouring child molesters; for still others a harmless part of the fabric of public life that they'd be sad to see go, but which ranks well beneath the post office or petrol station in its usefulness to the neighbourhood.

'Jesus is intriguing; the church is archaic'. That may serve as a snapshot of how many people in contemporary Britain and further afield think. This paper is intended to challenge the reader to think about the situation we find ourselves in, to help us to see in it a God-given opportunity and to think about how the church can respond to this opportunity. It is a call for the church to abandon maintenance and shift into mission. It is a manifesto for a church that is missional, that rises to the challenge to be all that God is calling us to be for the sake of His Kingdom and His mission in the world. We will first explore the challenge, then introduce missional thinking and correct some common misconceptions about it before finally offering some practical advice about how individuals and churches can become missional.

## The challenge of 'Post-Christendom'

From a Christian perspective the history of Europe can be thought of broadly in terms of three phases:

- **Pre-Christendom** – in the period from Pentecost until 313 AD, when emperor Constantine's Edict of Milan granted religious freedom in the Roman Empire, the church was a marginal group in a hostile, pluralistic society.
- **Christendom** – from the fourth century onwards the Church began to enjoy a privileged position in society and with rulers. The Reformation addressed issues of salvation and church practice but Protestants generally continued to work under the values of Christendom either through national 'established' churches cooperating with the State or 'free churches' that enjoyed the favour of the culture and populace.
- **Post-Christendom** – From the 18<sup>th</sup> Century onwards Christendom began to unravel with the growth of alternative philosophies, scientific rationalism and free market economics. This process accelerated rapidly in the second half of the Twentieth Century, especially from the 1960s onwards.

Although Christians may disagree over how welcome the end of Christendom is (some are glad to see the end of a system they believe to have been a distortion of the Church while others bemoan the loss of Christian influence), it is an indisputable fact that Christendom is coming to an end, at least in the Western world. Broadly, the transition from Christendom to the new period that can be called 'Post-Christendom' involves three shifts for the Church:

- **Mainstream to marginal** – whereas the Church used to be at the very centre of national and community life (think about the positioning of church buildings), it is now peripheral. Christian leaders are no longer shown special respect and the voice of the Church is no longer sought as a vital source of guidance. Christianity is on the margins.
- **Dominance to diversity** – whereas Christianity used to be thought of as the national religion or the majority faith, in most Western countries Christians are now in the minority and Christianity is simply one minority faith among many. Churches can no longer expect to control or even influence society as they once could.
- **Familiar to foreign** – whereas Christians used to feel at home in the culture we are increasingly strangers to it as our society's moorings to a Christian worldview are progressively severed. More and more people are also unfamiliar with the Christian message – the church and Christianity seems strange and foreign to them.

Perhaps the key difference between mission in Christendom and post-Christendom is that under Christendom we could call people to repent from the sin they already accepted they had committed, to return to the God they already believed existed and to trust in the unique Saviour, Jesus, they already acknowledged, whereas post-Christendom we cannot assume that people understand or acknowledge sin, that they believe in God or that they accept Jesus as unique. In fact, we cannot assume that they are familiar at all with the Bible or with the gospel.

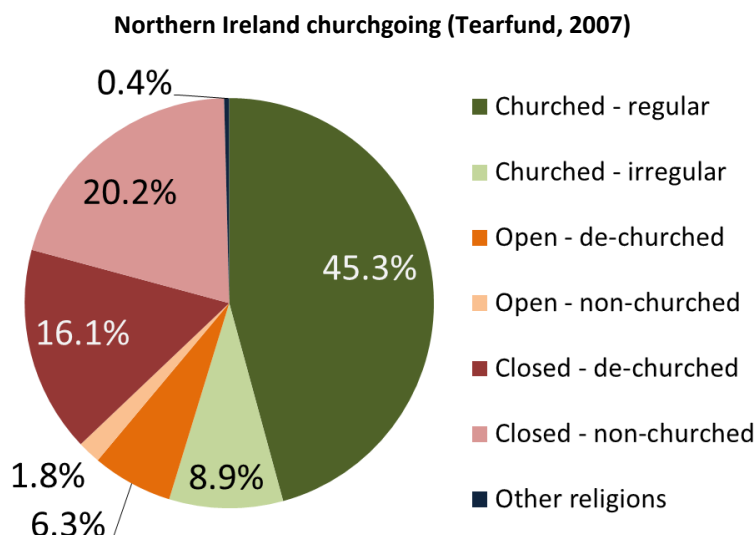
## Is Northern Ireland exceptional?

I realise that this section is likely to be of interest only to people from Northern Ireland or who are involved in church here. I hope, though, that it might be of some help to people in other contexts in terms of considering the kind of research that might be necessary for you to understand your context. Is Northern Ireland immune from the decline of Christendom? Consider the following statistics and observations:

- *Religion* – 86.4% 'Christian'; 13.9% no religion or unstated; 0.3% other religions or philosophies (2001 census). 68% believe that the Bible is God's inspired Word (Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey, 2004).
- *Church attendance* – 45.3% attend at least monthly compared to 15.5% in the UK (Tearfund report 2007). There is some evidence that the decline in church attendance has halted, especially among Protestants.
- *Personal faith* – 'evangelical', 14%; 'born again', 14%; turning point towards God, 29% (NILTS 2004); God definitely involved in my life, 25%; only God makes life meaningful, 38% (NILTS 2008)

- *Trends* – religious belief and practice decline across generational groups until the 25-34 age group but increase again in the 18-24 age group, except for daily prayer and church attendance. In the 18-24 year old age group only those who have a personal faith (report a turning point to God and find meaning in Him) go to church weekly (NILTS). There is some evidence of a halt in decline of faith and a stabilisation in the percentage of evangelicals in this age group. It is difficult to predict, however, how life events will impact the faith commitment of people as they age.
- *Secularisation* – Northern Ireland society is significantly less secular than in Great Britain, with churches retaining greater influence and respect, but consumes the same popular culture and is under much of the same legislation as GB (and the rest of the European Union). There is a growing segment of the population who are highly secular.

The Church is still relatively strong in Northern Ireland, both in terms of numbers attending church and the visibility and influence of Christian leaders in society, but we cannot be complacent. According to a 2007 study of churchgoing by Tearfund, 22.4% of adults in Northern Ireland are de-churched (previously attended church but no longer do) and 22% are non-churched (never had any personal church affiliation). Only 28% of the de-churched and 8% of the unchurched would consider engaging with church in future (the 'open de-churched' and 'open non-churched'). Of the 54.2% of people who are 'churched' (i.e., who attend church at least six times per year), the majority are regular churchgoers. 45.3% attend church at least once per month and other statistics show that most of these attend weekly). The other 8.9% attend less than once per month but at least six times per year.



Although it's notoriously difficult to predict the future, there are some things we can say with reasonable certainty. The percentage who are regular church goers may decline somewhat, but the decline is slowing down, especially among the Protestant community. We are fast approaching a situation where only those who have a genuine faith and experience of God go to church. The irregular churchgoers are likely to decline in number, shifting into the 'de-churched' group. Meanwhile, the children of the 'de-churched' group will become 'non-churched'. Of course these statistics don't reveal those people who have a personal Christian faith but aren't engaged with church. Another factor to note is that the decline in church attendance has been strongest in the four mainstream denominations (Roman Catholic, Presbyterian, Church of Ireland and Methodist) and that some of the decline in these churches has been offset by a growth in numbers attending new fellowships, non-denominational churches and smaller evangelical denominations. This transfer tells its own story and is worthy of consideration, especially in terms of why the mainstream denominations have lost such ground and what those Christians who move are motivated by. In some cases it may be theological convictions or a desire to be part of mission but in many it is undoubtedly a 'consumer' attitude, looking for the place that can give them most or where they (or often their children) can feel most at home.

The main conclusion I want to draw from the statistics for Northern Ireland is this: Christendom is alive and well in Northern Ireland but so is secular Europe. At the risk of over-simplification, we now have two parallel societies – one that remains firmly committed to Christian faith and (generally) to church, and one for whom Christian identity is at best nominal and which has rejected church as irrelevant or dangerous. Yet I firmly believe that the church in Northern Ireland

is in an exciting moment of opportunity. We still have numerical strength and a high degree of influence. We can appeal to the 8.1% of people who are not connected to church but are open to coming. We can provide events and courses that will connect them with the gospel and we can think about how our churches need to change to include them. The problem is, however, that most existing churches put most of their evangelistic efforts into approaches that are more likely to connect with the de-churched or open non-churched. Evangelistic events and courses won't reach the closed non-churched and closed de-churched, at least not unless they become 'open'. What will make them open up? I will argue that the answer is missional Christians and missional churches. Becoming missional doesn't mean neglecting the open de-churched and open non-churched – a missional church can reach these people just as effectively, perhaps more so, than a church providing traditional evangelistic events and courses, but it will also be able to reach those who are closed to church. A missional church may still have evangelistic events and courses but not as the main focus of its mission. The main focus will be on all believers in all of life.

A final comment on the statistics I have shared relates to what they don't show, which is the breakdown by area and social class of where the churchgoers are concentrated. Anecdotally most Christians in Northern Ireland would recognise that the church is predominantly middle class and that the areas with lowest rates of church attendance are working class. This is especially true in Belfast. Although there are still many church buildings in these areas, often with small elderly congregations, there is a definite concentration of de-churched and non-churched people around these buildings. Reliable statistics for variation between social classes is not available in the surveys I have referred to thus far, but in 2008 I was personally involved in conducting a survey on behalf of a local church in the outskirts of Belfast that intentionally compare rates of belief and church attendance across three areas of different socioeconomic characteristics close to the church. The following table summarises the findings across these three areas.

<b>Super Output Area</b>	<b>Mallusk 2</b>	<b>Glengormley 1</b>	<b>Carnmoney 1</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>
Deprivation rank, 2010 <sup>1</sup>	780	602	139	
Description of area	Upper middle class developments	Lower middle class streets	Working class housing estate	
Number of respondents	67	96	67	230
<b>How would you describe your religious faith?</b>				
Christian	64%	70%	51%	63%
Believe in God	10%	16%	15%	14%
Atheist	6%	1%	7%	4%
Agnostic	9%	7%	10%	9%
Other	10%	6%	16%	10%
<b>People describing Jesus as Son of God and the Bible as the Word of God</b>				
Percentage of respondents	40%	45%	33%	40%
Percentage of 'Christians'	63%	64%	65%	64%
<b>Frequency of attendance at a Christian church</b>				
Never	15%	9%	27%	16%
Special occasions only	19%	23%	24%	22%
More than twice monthly, less than weekly	24%	22%	22%	23%
At least once per week	42%	46%	26%	39%
<b>Percentage reporting no church affiliation</b>				
No church affiliation	10%	3%	21%	10%

These statistics suggest that people living in working class areas are much more likely to have no church affiliation and to never attend church than those in middle class areas. Church going and affiliation is also lower in upper middle class areas, although this phenomenon may also be partly due to the fact that this housing was newer and hence people had moved away from areas where they may have historically had a church connection. Levels of self-identification as 'Christian' and of belief in Jesus and respect for the Bible were also lower in the working class area. One major limitation of this study was the fact that it was conducted during the daytime, making it more likely to have an older category of people responding. It does, however, give some indication of the likely pattern across Northern Ireland. It is probably true that rates of church going and Christian faith will be lower still in more deprived areas, particularly on inner city

<sup>1</sup> This is the ranking according to the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency out of 890 Super Output Areas in Northern Ireland. The lower the score, the more deprived the area.

Belfast. The reality is that the church is failing to connect with working class communities. The problem is not physical presence of buildings – there are at least four church buildings of various denominations located in the working class housing estate I surveyed – but with the fact that the people meeting in these buildings often travel in from outside and do not live lives connected with the life of the community they meet in. They are not missional.

Another aspect of the Northern Ireland situation that must not be ignored is the unique history and makeup of this place in religious terms and especially the role that religion had, or is perceived to have had, in that history. This is a major problem for many who are closed to church but it is also problematic for some who feel that the church has abandoned them (especially in working class Protestant areas). The relationship between churches and political stances and paramilitarism in Northern Ireland is complex, but however we understand it we must recognise that the church has a role in bringing healing and reconciliation. This is part of our mission in this place. Sadly, in my observation, some newer churches don't see this as part of their calling. They fail to appreciate the depth of the issues and they often work primarily among a small subgroup of the population, the young professionals, who either don't want to speak about these issues, have actively decided to move on from them or, perhaps, don't understand themselves how deeply ingrained certain patterns of thinking and even prejudices are. Everyone in Northern Ireland is defined by the sectarian divide, even if we choose to define ourselves by not wanting to be defined by it! The church must speak into this situation and bring the gospel of the Kingdom to bear on it.

## Introducing 'missional' thinking

Upon returning to the UK in 1974 after nearly 40 years as a missionary in India, Lesslie Newbigin realised that the West was fast becoming as pluralistic as India but that the Church had not adapted to the reality. He wrote provocatively about the need to see Europe as a mission field and to connect the gospel with Western culture (*The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* and *Foolishness to the Greeks*). The Gospel and Our Culture Network in North America, inspired by Newbigin, coined the term 'missional' to describe churches that were prepared to think seriously about mission in their context based on a three way conversation (a 'trialogue') between gospel, culture and church. Although 'missional' has been widely used to mean different things, the following quotation captures its heart:

a working definition of missional church is a community of God's people that defines itself, and organizes its life around, its real purpose of being an agent of God's mission to the world. In other words, the church's true and authentic organizing principle is mission. When the church is in mission, it is the true church.

(Alan Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways*, p.82)

There is significant debate within and around what has been called the 'missional church conversation' around what exactly 'missional' means, but these debates really depend on different understandings of 'mission'.<sup>2</sup> The central insight of the missional church is that mission is God's mission and the church and believers should be missionary in their posture and behaviour. We need to rediscover missional thinking both for practical reasons (it's the only way we can effectively reach the post-Christendom world) and for theological reasons (it is what God intends us to be).

Although mission is not in itself a biblical word, it is a useful label for what we do when we reach out to the world in the name of Christ as God calls us to. Traditionally churches have thought of mission as something that happens in other countries, usually across cultural divides and carried out by professional 'missionaries'. Churches often have a mission department or team. In some traditions the word 'mission' is also used to mean a special evangelistic campaign lasting a limited period of time, usually led by a specially called evangelist. Missional thinking seeks to break down these barriers. It seeks to equip every believer to be involved in mission in every aspect of life at every time. Home, work and social spaces are all a mission field. Instead of describing mission (including evangelism) as one ministry of the church it should become the driving force and organising principle behind every ministry. This stems from a realisation that God is a

<sup>2</sup> A map of the missional church conversation is beyond the remit of this article. The best published work outlining the various strands in the conversation is Craig Van Gelder and Dwight Zscheile's *The Missional Church in Perspective* (2011, Baker Academic), although they also seek to advance their own theological imagination for what the missional church should be, some aspects of which this author would not necessarily endorse.

missional God and that mission is His mission (the technical term is *missio Dei*).<sup>3</sup> God initiated Christian mission by sending His Son into the world, and we continue the mission of Jesus to proclaim God's Kingdom and call people to repent from sin acknowledge Jesus as Lord. As we do this, however, we respond to God's ongoing initiative – we are not the primary agents of mission; the Holy Spirit is. We do not advance God's mission by our clever programmes and strategies, but we humbly seek to follow His leading, recognising that He is already active in the world and that we must follow Him. We need to ask what missional children's, youth, adult, music ministry etc. would look like? This won't mean neglecting teaching, care and discipleship for existing believers – in fact it will drive you to need more of all three and all three will become more relevant as lives are oriented towards missional engagement in the world rather than maintaining ourselves in a peaceful status quo. Also, remember that the mission is about making disciples so it includes building up those who already believe! 'Fellowship' means more than just being together or even supporting one another, it means partnership together in God's mission.

Lesslie Newbigin recognised that our culture can only be effectively reached with the gospel 'when local congregations [...] recognize that they exist for the sake of those who are not members, as **sign**, **instrument** and **foretaste** of God's redeeming grace for the whole life of society.' The three words in bold explain the way in which the church relates to the Kingdom of God (God's active rule). The church is a community of the Kingdom. It is called to be a:

- *Sign* – pointing others to the reality of the Kingdom as we proclaim Christ as Lord
- *Instrument* – making the Kingdom manifest as we see social justice in Jesus' name
- *Foretaste* – expressing the reality of the Kingdom in the way we relate to one another as God's people

The church must maintain these three dimensions in harmony. If we neglect one then we cease to be what God calls us to be. We might even say that if we neglect one then we effectively cease to be the church in anything but name – we 'unchurch' ourselves. Thus if we prioritise evangelism without social engagement or vice versa we are in dangerous territory. We cannot be sign without being instrument and vice versa. Mission must be holistic in the sense that it includes both social engagement and evangelism. At the same time, if we prioritise mission in a way that neglects the nature of the church as a foretaste of the kingdom then we have also strayed from what we ought to be. This is the danger of the seeker-sensitive approach to church services. Missional thinking challenges us to be confident to be the church. We don't need to make our gatherings accessible to outsiders; we need to ensure that they are foretaste of the Kingdom so that unbelievers who join them will see that God is present and glorify Him (1 Corinthians 14:23-25). The church is an outpost of Heaven, a community of strangers, a colony of aliens. We should feel foreign to the unbeliever but not because he can't understand what we are doing and saying (if we are stuck in archaic language or following patterns that are not explained) but because he can't explain the love and truth that is evident in us.

## Clarifying potential misunderstandings

Problems often arise in the life of the church when we get caught up in false dichotomies. We have a tendency to emphasise one truth to such a degree that an alternative truth is neglected and so we become imbalanced. Missional church thinking can sometimes seem to be pushing things to an extreme that causes something important to be lost (in fact, in some cases when people speak carelessly or don't think sufficiently it may be guilty as charged).

- **Overseas AND home**

We can no longer think of the 'mission field' as another country or continent. Northern Ireland is now a mission field. We must break down the division between 'evangelism' as something we do locally and 'mission' as something done overseas. This does not, however, mean neglecting support of foreign missions – in fact, it should inspire us to give more sacrificially to support it as we begin to truly understand what cross-cultural mission is about and as God increases our vision. It does mean being more thoughtful about how we can engage with our community, learning from best practice in overseas mission and not assuming that old methods will continue to work.

- **Incarnational AND attractational**

---

<sup>3</sup> See Chris Wright's excellent book *The Mission of God* (IVP, 2006) for a detailed explanation of how mission is the organising theme of Scripture.

Churches have traditionally depended on attracting people in to the church building. In the past this happened through calls to worship (traditionally the ringing of bells) and more recently it has been through events and evangelistic courses (e.g., *Alpha* and *Christianity Explored*). This approach is still valid for those in our culture who are 'open dechurched' or 'open unchurched' (around 8% of the population), but is unlikely to reach the 500,000 people who are closed to the idea of church. We must discover a different approach to mission if we are to reach these people. That doesn't mean neglecting the attractational power of a genuine Christian community. In fact we need to ensure that our community is attractive and genuinely reflects the gospel (love and sincerity matter most). When we invite people in to a church event we must ask what it is that we are hoping will attract them. If it is just a professional event or a slick performance then we are not offering anything that they can't find in the world. The real power of attraction is found in individual lives and a community life that are unlike anything they can find anywhere else. When people see the church as God intended it – a community of people who wouldn't naturally belong together but who love one another with a sacrificial and unfailing love – it is immensely powerful. In Lesslie Newbigin's powerful phrase, the congregation becomes the 'hermeneutic of the gospel'. Even if we carry on some attractational events we must certainly engage in mission where people are and this must be our priority. We can begin by reaching those who are like us, which comes most naturally, but if we are to reach all kinds of people then it will involve crossing cultural barriers (e.g., ethnicity, generation, class). This approach is often called 'incarnational' because it follows the example of the incarnate Christ. Although the term is not necessarily always helpful, since there are aspects of Christ's incarnation that we cannot copy (incarnation, after all, literally means taking on flesh), it has become the predominant term for mission that engages with people in their cultural context.

Alan Hirsch suggests that incarnational mission must include:<sup>4</sup>

1. *Presence* – be with people in relationships.
2. *Proximity* – stick closely with people in their need.
3. *Powerlessness* – serving others in humility and compassion.
4. *Proclamation* – faithfully communicate the gospel message in terms they can understand.

To these we must add the possibility of including people in our gospel-shaped communities (church or small group) where they will see the reality of the gospel lived out. This continued attractational power of the church shouldn't be neglected (although some writers like Hirsch appear to do so). If we are genuinely incarnational, however, we have to allow the church to reflect the people who God has called to Himself. This might mean changing how we do church in matters that Scripture doesn't regulate so that people from a different background or culture can be genuinely at home or even starting new churches if that is impossible, although in that case we need to be very aware of the unity of the Church and of the nature of the gospel in reconciling people from all backgrounds into one new humanity in Christ.

Our missional cutting edge is not events that are *like* the culture, but a life and message that are *unlike* the culture  
(Tim Chester and Steve Timmis, *Everyday Church*, p.56)

### • Existing churches AND new churches

Missional church thinking often leads to an emphasis on planting new congregations or beginning movements of reproducible home churches. This may be necessary as unchurched people come to faith, especially if they can't integrate into existing churches or if there is no church in reach of them. Existing churches need to be open to this possibility and give their blessing to what emerges. Missional thinking should, however, be concerned about existing churches too. The unity of the church is part of its essence, not an optional extra, and true missional thinking will always seek to promote unity. Missional does not mean a commitment to only one form of being church – it is about the driving force and purpose of church being the gospel and mission. That means that it is not about superficial changes (tinkering at the edges) but a fundamental change of motivation and values. A traditional church that makes that change will be missional (and will probably begin to change bit by bit). A new fellowship that is not driven by the gospel and mission is not missional, however appealing it might be to consumer Christians and however trendy or innovative it might look.

<sup>4</sup> Alan Hirsch. 2006. *The Forgotten Ways: Reactivating the Missional Church* (Grand Rapids: Brazos), p.133-134

- **Gathered AND scattered**

The church is the body of Christ – those who believe in Him united in Him. We are accustomed to thinking that church means Christians gathered together (assuming we recognise it isn't the building!) Missional thinking challenges us to realise that individual Christians are still part of the church when they are scattered. They are not the church when they are scattered – by definition church means a gathering – but they are still part of it. Both gathering and scattering are important. The individual believer incarnates the gospel in his or her life, but there is a sense in which the gospel can only be fully presented through the gathered community of diverse believers. Our gatherings should assist us in our scattered lives and our scattered lives should not be divorced from the gathering. We need to recognise that we are still part of Christ and therefore of one another wherever we are.

- **Younger AND older**

Missional thinking tends to be popular with younger people, but true missional thinking isn't content with that. Being missional is not just a young man's game – people of any age can be missional in their attitude and behaviour. Missional thinking won't leave young and old as irreconcilable parties either – it constantly drives towards unity and shared life in Christ. Those younger people who are truly gripped by the gospel (truly missional) will not be consumers in their attitude to church. They will be willing to sacrifice much for the sake of those who don't see it their way. They will appreciate alternative forms of worship and styles of music that are meaningful to older generations. They won't be immature in thinking that only the familiar or the new is good. They will draw on the riches of Christian tradition without being either experimental for the sake of it or ignorant of the way in which theology and practice constantly shape one another in a continual cycle.

- **Specialists AND everybody**

Missional church thinking tends to simplify church and trust every believer to be able to be a carrier of the gospel – able to articulate it and hold firmly to it. That may suggest that there is no longer a role for those who traditionally have been called 'clergy', but actually it makes the role of people who are gifted to the church with a ministry of the word even more vital. Those who are called to this kind of ministry will need to be more rooted in the gospel and more aware of contemporary culture. They will need to focus on equipping the saints. If clergy can become this then there will be a valuable role for them to play. There will also be a need for specialists who can research the culture, connect the gospel to it and communicate the gospel in a way that connects into the lives of people who live in the culture. These specialists will be flexible and responsive to changes in the culture and context.

## **Pre-Christendom v. Post-Christendom**

There are many similarities between pre-Christendom and post-Christendom which mean that we can learn a great deal from the early church in terms of how we can live faithfully and missionally in our new context. In both contexts the task of the church is to declare the Lordship of Christ in a pluralistic and often hostile world. There are, however, several major differences that we should not ignore. These factors mean that we cannot simply pretend that our approach today should be identical to the approach of Christians in the first few centuries after Christ.

- **State sponsored diversity, not uniformity**

The Roman Empire sought to enforce uniformity through a State cult. Until the early fourth century this meant that the Christian claim that Christ alone was Lord resulted in persecution from an empire which saw the emperor as the unrivalled head of a pagan religious system. When Constantine legalised and then favoured Christianity, he sought to replace paganism with Christianity as the State cult. His successors took this process further until Christianity was enforced as the only religion of the empire. This made good political sense, as the emperor's primary responsibility was to maintain the unity of the empire and uniform religion was one way to achieve this, but it had a significant impact on the nature of the Church. In the modern world the State does not seek to enforce uniformity but sponsors a policy of diversity. Although it may be argued that this results in some enforcement of uniformity (at least an expectation of uniform tolerance) and we may wonder whether it may lead to greater restriction of freedom in the future, the fact is that the State policy is not the same now as it was under Rome. This means that we are unlikely to face open persecution but that we are highly likely to face a constant pressure to privatise our faith and restrict the



declaration of Christ's Lordship only to the church. We will need to think very hard about what this means in terms of the way we engage politically and in the public sphere and we will need to navigate the path of a clear and unmistakable proclamation of Christ as Lord and an equally clear and unmistakable love for all people.

- **Christendom's legacy in history**

We cannot ignore or deny 2000 years of Christian history. Christendom happened and it shaped Western history and culture profoundly. This is both a curse and a blessing. It is a curse because some people will dismiss Christianity as a relic of the past, a fossilised curiosity, a stage in the evolution of our society to higher things or the cause of historical enmities and hostilities. It is a blessing because it means that a visit to any historic art gallery provides an opportunity to explain Scripture and the gospel. We can explain the positive impact Christians and churches had in our history and ultimately we can draw people to the historical person of Jesus.

- **Echoes of Christianity in culture**

There are many echoes of the gospel in our contemporary culture. Even at the level of language, Christianity and the Bible have shaped the way we speak and the words we use, whether through phrases or swearwords. These linguistic connections are opportunities to connect the gospel with everyday life. More significantly, major gospel themes are embedded in much of our culture, even for people who have rejected Christianity. The dominance of American culture may even be helpful in this respect – consider how many Hollywood movies tell stories of fall, redemption and consummation. The person of Jesus still evokes a positive response from many people who have no time for organised Christianity. We can use these starting points to connect the gospel to people's lives.

- **The church is still here!**

This is perhaps the most important difference between pre-Christendom and post-Christendom. There are no 'virgin territories' or 'unchurched regions' in the West. There *are* unchurched people and even what we might call unreached people groups (generational or social groupings as well as immigrant communities) but there are existing congregations of Christians not too far away from these people. We cannot go about the task of mission in the West as if the church were not already here. To plant new churches with no regard for existing churches could be highly destructive in the longer term even if it reaches some in the short term. We must reflect and think carefully about how we can maintain and express the unity of the church. We must be committed equally to seeing new churches established and to reinvigorating existing churches and helping them to become more missional in the post-Christendom world. This will require humility on all sides. Existing churches must think about supporting mobile mission teams close to them, allowing them freedom to innovate and even to fail. Entrepreneurial church planting types must reflect theologically and forge partnerships when at all possible rather than steaming ahead in isolation. In the post-Christendom world the visible unity of Christians will be more important than ever before. We cannot afford the sinful luxury of acting as if we were in competition with one another or presenting ourselves as the latest variety of Christianity to be sampled. We must also think about issues of church size and structure.

Many writers are suggesting that the most appropriate type of church for the post-Christendom era will be small, simple, easily reproducible churches, perhaps meeting in homes. Whether or not we embrace that idea, we must realise that for the foreseeable future, especially in Northern Ireland, it will still be possible for some churches to grow significantly by the transfer from other churches of those who are already Christians. This can give a false sense of security as the Christians in these large and growing churches feel buoyant. In fact the reality may be that overall numbers of believers and of churchgoers are in significant decline. Eventually the larger churches will no longer be immune from the process. The consolidation of believers into larger churches is problematic because it often means that neighbourhoods are neglected as people travel larger distances to church and it is unlikely that people from less advantaged social groups (especially those without a car) will be able to or will care to travel so far to church services.

## **Biblical foundations for missional thinking**

Despite the differences between the pre-Christendom period and the post-Christendom contemporary world, the contexts are sufficiently similar for us to learn a great deal about how we might be missional now by looking back to the

example of the first century. In this section we will consider two relevant passages of the New Testament which will give us insights into how the first generation of believers impacted their world with the gospel. These passages important biblical principles here that will help us to think through how we can be missional today. In selecting two passages it must be said that the biblical foundation for a missional understanding of church is not confined to the New Testament epistles. In fact, the whole story of Scripture provides a firm basis for the missional church. For a demonstration of this truth the reader is recommended to read Michael Goheen's *A Light to the Nations*.

## Colossians 4:2-6 – The origin and means of mission

These five verses are given an unfortunate title in many English translations of the New Testament. Both the NIV and the ESV entitle the section "Further Instructions", implying that it is sort of appendix where Paul throws together a few ideas that didn't quite fit with the more important things he said earlier in the letter. The NLT does better, entitling the passage "An Encouragement for Prayer". This title reflects the concerns of verse 2 and the exhortations to pray in verses 3 and 4, but it still doesn't explain how these verses fit together with verses 5 and 6. I maintain that these verses are not an apostolic afterthought or simply a comment on prayer. Rather, they say something very important about Paul's understanding of God's mission in the world. The verses can be divided into three parts as follows:

1. *The origin of mission* – the heart of God (v2)
2. *The means of mission* – the people of God (v3-6)
  - a. Mobile mission teams (v3-4)
  - b. Local missional churches (v5-6)

This way of considering the verses explains their connection with the preceding chapter, which describes how the local church in Colosse should live as "God's chosen people" (3:12), and with the remainder of chapter 4, which speaks of the work of Paul's "fellow-workers for the kingdom of God" (4:11).

### ***Mission's origin in the heart of God (v2)***

Firstly, Paul explains the most important point of all that we must grasp if we are to become missional – **mission starts with God!** Mission is not a biblical word, so we shouldn't be too wedded to it, but it is still a useful term to describe God's ongoing work in His world of forming redeemed people into one new humanity in Christ. When we engage in mission we are joining God in His work, which He began long before we were born and which He will bring to completion. Realising this can bring us great hope when we might tend to despair at the seemingly impossible task of mission to the post-Christendom world. God will continue His mission and it will succeed in His plan and His time. At the same time, realising that mission is God's mission should challenge us to be devoted to prayer as we must ensure that we understand God's heart and are obedient to His leading. Notice too that Paul tells us to be watchful and thankful. He expects us to be aware of what God is doing in the world so that we can thank Him for it and to become aware we must be watchful. Christians who pray are deeply interested in what God is doing in the world. That is why rediscovering mission at home is no threat to our support of missions overseas. A missional church will have a real interest in God's mission to His world.

### ***Mobile mission teams (v3-6)***

Secondly, Paul continues to ask specifically for prayer for His missionary team. Paul's team is the one we know most about because of the testimony of Acts and of his epistles, but other mobile mission teams are alluded to in the New Testament. From verses 3 and 4 we can build a picture of what Paul's team was like:

- **A team with a key leader** – Paul speaks in the plural, asking for prayer "for us" (v3). Paul was an apostle, which in the New Testament means he was one of a small number of people who were witnesses of the risen Christ and who were entrusted directly by Him with the gospel. We do not have apostles today (by definition we cannot) but we can still learn from Paul's example as the leader of a mission team. He drew other younger people into his team and supported and trained them to become effective missionaries. The clearest example of this in the New Testament is Timothy, but chapter 4 gives us a number of other examples – Tychicus (v7), Onesimus (v9), Aristarchus (v10), Mark (v10), Jesus also called Justus (v11), Epaphras (v12), Luke and Demas (v14). Paul was the key figure within the team but he worked in partnership and was committed to developing others so that they, in turn, could develop others (see 2 Timothy 2:2).

- **Mobile and responsive** – Paul’s team was highly mobile. Acts tells how they moved around the Mediterranean world staying for short periods in some places and longer periods in others (ranging between a few days and a few years). Their journeys were directed by circumstances and the Spirit’s guidance. Paul could send members on special missions or leave some personnel behind in cities to continue work there while he moved on elsewhere. In verse 3 he asks for prayer “that God may open a door for our message”. At this point Paul himself is in chains but he is still very much involved in the activities of his team. This kind of team is able to be highly responsive to changing needs and situations. They have freedom to attempt new approaches in their work (Paul constantly innovated) and even to ‘fail’ (or appear to fail), learning from their failures.
- **Specific gifts** – Paul was gifted to proclaim the gospel clearly, and he prays that he may be faithful in that task (v4). The other people he recruited from the churches to join his team were also particularly gifted in proclaiming the gospel. Paul’s teams did not have the full range of gifts that we might expect in a local church but they did contain some of the most able teachers and preachers from the churches. These local churches were willing to release these individuals to be part of the mobile mission team.
- **Supported by local churches** – Paul is writing to a local church asking for their prayerful support. He ensured that they also had news about what his team were doing (4:9). At times Paul’s team received financial support from the churches, although at other times he supported himself through making tents. In any case, there was an important relationship between the churches and Paul’s team. They did not act in isolation but recruited members from the churches and received support from them as well as supporting the churches through letters and teaching in person.

The task of Paul’s mission team was threefold:

- *To take the gospel to new places and peoples* – Paul was particularly called to work in areas where the gospel had not yet been proclaimed (see Romans 15:20).
- *To establish local churches under local leadership* – we see this process at work in Acts 14:21-23. Paul and his team always formed new believers together into a church and they ensured that local leaders who would keep the church faithful to the gospel were identified and recognised.
- *To strengthen existing churches* – Paul and his team continued to support the churches they established, and some they had not established, by developing leaders and teaching or sending letters.

This kind of mobile mission team has not been common in the Western world at least in recent centuries. We may ask whether in the changing context of post-Christendom we need to find ways of re-establishing teams like this that could work in relationship with churches, engaging in mission and strengthening existing churches.

#### **Local missional churches (v5-6)**

Thirdly, Paul gives advice to the church in Colosse about their part in God’s mission. The local churches were different from Paul’s mobile mission team in two important respects:

- **Diversity of members** – whereas the mission team included only tried and tested believers who were gifted in proclaiming the gospel, the churches were diverse communities of believers of all ages, from all backgrounds, at all stages in their faith, having the full range of spiritual gifting (hence Paul’s teaching earlier in the letter).
- **Settled locality** – Paul’s team was mobile, moving from place to place, but the churches were firmly rooted and established in one locality. The believers lived in a network of relationships in their families and the wider society.

Despite these differences, it is clear that Paul saw the local churches as no less missional than his team. It is interesting to note how seldom the New Testament letters challenge Christians to engage in evangelism, but the way Paul writes here (and the way Peter writes in the second passage we will consider) makes it clear that the reason for this omission is that mission, including evangelism, was to be the way of life of the believers. They would engage in everyday mission through:

- **Devotion to prayer (v2)** – the watchful and thankful prayer of the church is not simply to be for Paul’s team but also about its own situation. As they seek God’s heart they will begin to develop wisdom and to notice opportunities.

- **Wisdom in relating to 'outsiders' (v5a)** – they need God-given wisdom to know how to live in a world where they are outsiders, rubbing shoulders with people who are outsiders to the church. They must not go through life thoughtlessly but with intentionality, seeking God's guidance in every relationship and situation.
- **Seizing every opportunity (v5b)** – they are to see interactions with 'outsiders' not as inconveniences or as threatening encounters but as potential opportunities to communicate Christ.
- **Gracious and provocative speech (v6a)** – they are not simply to demonstrate Christ in actions but to proclaim Him through words. Firstly, their manner should always be gracious. This in itself is a powerful testimony to the grace that they have found in Christ. People desperately need grace, and they notice it when they experience it. Secondly, their words should be seasoned with salt. Salty words are provocative. This may mean openly sharing the gospel, but it may simply mean speaking differently about the things people are already talking about or dropping biblical wisdom into a conversation. Our words should 'taste' different than the words of others – richer and more full of flavour. They should provoke people to ask us what makes us different, to want to hear our story.
- **Knowing how to answer everyone (v6b)** – when people ask they must be able to answer. The "everyone" (NIV) or "each person" (ESV) is also significant. Missional people understand that there are different ways to communicate the same message to different people. They understand who the person is and connect the gospel with their concerns and situation. They are very aware of the culture and the context in which people live.

### 1 Peter 2:9-17; 3:13-16 – Mission in the everyday

Peter writes this letter to Christians across five regions of the Roman world (1:1). There is much to learn from the letter about missional living (Tim Chester and Steve Timmis base their book *Everyday Church* on 1 Peter). In these verses we see a pattern emerging of four elements that must be present for the believers to engage in God's mission:

- **Christ-shaped communities ...**  
Peter reminds them that they are "now ... God's people" (2:10). As Gentiles they were without mercy and did not know God, but now they have been formed together into the new humanity that Christ came to redeem. This reality is to be lived out in their churches as they share life together in God's family. In chapter 3 verse 8 he describes what this looks like. The community of the church is important for two reasons:
  - *'attractional'* – it demonstrates to the world an alternative version of what it means to be human. It displays the reality of God's work through the gospel in our lives. In the church people should see a reality (genuine love and humility) that they cannot see elsewhere.
  - *'incarnational'* – the church supports and equips believers to incarnate the gospel where they are in their everyday lives. It provides a safe home base where they can experience the gospel again in the context of harmony and care. It provides them with teaching and encouragement to keep going.
- **... of Christ-honouring people ...**  
Peter reminds them that they are "aliens and strangers in the world" (2:11) and challenges them to "live as servants of God" (v16). As believers they are to expect (2:12):
  - *Opposition* – this is inevitable when Christians live as God's servants in a world that is pluralistic and hostile. Opposition then included both malicious and ignorant talk (2:12, 15; 3:16) and the very real possibility of physical violence (3:13). We must also expect opposition if we are determined to be faithful in our engagement in God's mission.
  - *Christ's return* – this reality changes everything. It frames this world in its proper context. Ultimately there will be vindication and justice for God's people but also there is limited time in which we can demonstrate the truth of the gospel to the world. We seek to honour God alone and to bring as many people to glorify Him on the day when Christ returns.

The Christian response to opposition and to the realisation that Christ is simple – to "live such good lives" (2:12). The word translated "good" in this phrase is different from the one that is translated "good" elsewhere in 1 Peter. It does

not focus so much on the things we do as on the attitudes we have – the kind of people we really are. A better translation might be “such *winsome* lives”. To be winsome means a life that is deeply attractive to others. As we read on in chapter 2 and into chapter 3 we realise that there are two major dimensions to this attractiveness:

- *Attitude to others* – this is to be typified by **honour** (2:17). Honour means much more than tolerance (a popular idea today) or even respect. It means to recognise the fundamental value of the person as created and loved by God and to treat them as if they were truly special and significant. That kind of attitude was profoundly counter-cultural in Peter’s time and it still is today!
- *Attitude to life* – this is to be marked by **hope** (3:15). Rather than being negative, critical and complaining, Christians are to be people of hope. We see beyond the circumstances in this world, the negative headlines and the current suffering we endure to the glorious future God is bringing about. This attitude is not wishful thinking, but is grounded in the living hope we have because Christ is risen and our inheritance is secure in Him (see 1 Peter 1:3-6).

- **... being a Christ-like presence ...**

Peter tells them to “live ... among the pagans” (2:12). There is no point in being genuinely different from the world if the world cannot see us! Incarnational living means that we live out the gospel and bring the presence of Christ into the context of the world. Calling those who aren’t Christians ‘pagans’ might seem insulting to modern ears, but it simply recognises the fact that there are people all around us who don’t know God and who don’t share our hope in Christ. The only way we will impact them is to live among them. Later in this article we will consider some simple ways to put this into practice. For now we must accept this as a challenge not to retreat in the face of the post-Christendom world, however strange we may feel within it, but to engage actively in it.

- **... practicing Christ-centred communication.**

In chapter 3 verses 13-16 Peter tells the believers to be ready to give an answer (or a defence) for their hope. These verses describe the ingredients of effective evangelism:

- *Christ the Lord* (“Do not fear ... with ... respect [fear]”) – the most important ingredient is Christ. We are conscious of His presence and we acknowledge that He is Lord. His Lordship extends beyond our hearts to all the world but we are the ones who acknowledge it here and now. It is this acknowledgment that keeps us committed to honouring Him and motivates us to share the good news about Him. This reality connects with the final word of verse 15. In the NIV this says “respect”, but that is actually a mistranslation. We don’t owe respect to people who are not Christians (that might imply respecting their beliefs which may conflict with the gospel), although we do owe them proper honour (see above), and that is much more powerful! The actual word that Peter uses is “fear”, the same word that appears in verse 14 when he says not to fear what others fear or not to fear them. Peter is clearly not contradicting himself. We do not fear what everyone else fears and we do not fear opposition because the only person we fear is Christ Himself! We fear Him not in the sense of being uncertain about what He will think or do, but in the Old Testament sense of reverent respect for Him. He is the only One we seek to please and to serve (we are Christ-honouring people).
- *Distinctiveness* (“hope ... good behaviour”) – evangelism will not be effective if we are not distinctive in our attitudes (see above) and our actions. Peter expects that the lifestyle of Christians will provoke people to notice so that others will take the initiative in asking them to explain their faith.
- *Readiness* (“Always ... prepared”) – we must be ready both in the sense of looking for opportunities (remember Colossians) and of having a clear grasp of the gospel and how to apply it to people’s needs. This means being aware of the culture and context (again remember Colossians) and knowing how to connect the gospel to it. We may need to do some reading and thinking and we must certainly be more saturated in the Bible!
- *Explanation* (“give the reason”) – although Paul’s mission team contained experts in proclamation, the Bible doesn’t expect every Christian to be able to preach a gospel message. Peter does, however, expect that every believer will be able simply to explain the reason for their hope, to make a reasoned defence for it. This will mean being able to tell your story of faith but also to simply explain the gospel story in terms that make sense to the person you are speaking to.

- *Humility* (“with gentleness”) – remember what we said above about the mis-translation in v15 (not “respect” for the person but “fear” of the Lord). The other word that describes the way we should communicate does apply to the person we are speaking to. The NIV says “gentleness”, but “humility” is probably a better translation. We are to have no arrogance, no stance of judgementalism and no sense of superiority. It was possible (although wrong) for Christians in Christendom to take that stance but now we would simply be laughed at or dismissed as hypocrites. We must recapture this biblical stance of humility in the way we engage with the public sphere and especially in the way we relate to others and communicate the gospel to them.

## Twelve features of the missional church

In previous versions of this paper I referred to twelve steps towards becoming a missional church, but I have since reflected on the fact that speaking in those terms suggests yet another programme for reshaping our churches. I now speak of twelve features of the missional church since the church is God’s creation by His Spirit, called by Him under His initiative to be His instrument in His mission. That is why the first feature in this list is watchful and thankful prayer, since we cannot become the missional church unless we are dependent upon God.

### 1. The missional church prays watchfully and thankfully

We must become people who notice what God is doing in our nation, city and neighbourhood. Walking and talking to people and reading our local newspaper will help us notice. When we pray together it should be marked by gratitude and expectation that God will guide us to recognise the opportunities he is opening up for us. Our prayers should not feel like us coming to God to tell Him what He needs to know and ask Him to bless the plans we have already made. Instead we need to come openly to Him seeking to learn from Him what we need to know and to be guided by His Spirit in the plans that we make. We need to recognise where God is already at work in our neighbourhoods and follow the Spirit’s leading to get involved with it.

**Q:** How can your prayer times become more ‘watchful’?

### 2. The missional church confronts idols within and around

We need to confront the idols in our own hearts that also captivate the hearts of many in our society. Only by doing this will we become truly distinctive and aware of the spiritual battle in which we are engaged. There are three major areas of idolatry that we must confront: <sup>5</sup>

- *Money* – we will demonstrate a generous commitment of possessions, time and living space to mission. We will seek to live sacrificially as stewards of God who refuse to be defined by material things.
- *Sex* – we will maintain biblical standards of sexual morality within the church, but warmly embrace those in society who do not, refusing to define them by their sexual ‘orientation’ or practice.
- *Power* – we will seek to share power, serving from a position of powerlessness and breaking down barriers of class, ethnicity, generation. We will not manipulate, dominate or subjugate others.

**Q:** How have these three idols gripped your heart and infiltrated your church?

### 3. The missional church simplifies structures and activities around the gospel and mission

The following questions (based on suggestions by Tim Chester and Steve Timmis in *Everyday Church*, p.123-125) can help you determine how missional your ‘group’ (local church or small group) currently is and identify aspects of your church life that may need to change:

<sup>5</sup> Tim Keller refers to these and they have been identified repeatedly throughout Christian history, for example in the three traditional vows of monastic movements: poverty, chastity and obedience.

1. How often do unbelievers spend time with your group?  
once a month :: once a week :: twice a week :: more than twice a week
2. How often does your group spend time with unbelievers on their territory, in places where they feel comfortable?  
hardly ever :: once a month :: once a week :: more than twice a week
3. Are the prayers of your group missional? Do you pray regularly for:  
opportunities :: boldness to speak of Christ :: the conversion of the lost :: the spread of the gospel around the world
4. With how many unbelievers does your group have Bible studies or regular conversations about Jesus?  
none :: one or two :: three or four :: many
5. How many people in your group do your most significant unbelieving friends know by name?  
none :: one or two :: about half of them :: most of them
6. Would you bring your closest unbelieving friends to a typical get-together of your group?  
no :: only if it's specifically designed around them :: yes

Your church may need to cut out programmes that don't relate to God's mission in the world. Taking the red pen to the church diary might be one of the most effective ways to maximise your missional potential. Sometimes Christians are just so busy with meetings that they can't conceive of time to be missional. Would you be better with one service rather than two? Does the church need to run this activity? If people are already doing it in the community why not get your church people to join those existing groups with gospel intentionality? Of course, if there is no opportunity in the community then the church may well take the lead in arranging something but this doesn't have to be on church property or in the name of the church. If you are thinking of a new building consider how the community will perceive it. What message does it send? Broadly church buildings can either imply:

- *Domination* – when the building looks like an imposing edifice (in past times in the Gothic style resembling a castle and more recently on a scale to rival the local shopping mall or council offices).
- *Separation* – when the building seems to be protected from all possible intrusion (think carefully about fences, gates, grills on windows, architecture that looks excessively 'churchy').
- *Invitation* – warm and inviting but still not of the community (only space for your own notices, not open for bookings by other groups, furnished in an excessively middle class style).
- *Participation* – looks and feels like it is of and for the community.

Strategic planning methodologies (setting a plan for one to three years ahead), which have gained some popularity in church circles in recent decades, are less likely to be appropriate in a more rapidly changing and unpredictable world. It is important to have greater flexibility than we have traditionally allowed. We need to create space to experiment, take risks and even fail. We won't always get things right but keeping what we do simple allows us to fail without losing too much and to change when it is necessary. Cut out everything that does not contribute to your one purpose of making disciples of Jesus Christ.

As you consider change in church structures and activities, remember that you're not seeking change for change's sake but for the sake of the gospel. Keep the gospel central to everything you do – its goal of making faithful disciples of Christ who form one new people of God (shaping what you do), its message of Christ crucified as Saviour and risen as Lord (deciding what you communicate) and its values of death to self and resurrection power (determining how you do it). You may need to change the style of public facing meetings to make them more easily understood for non-Christians or welcoming for people without a church background or from a different culture. Think about the language we use, the way we dress and the unwritten rituals we fail to explain. This is not the same as starting 'seeker-sensitive' services, which aim to remove anything that might offend or provoke non-Christians. Don't see your services as the only, or even the main, door to the church. Most unchurched people won't come initially through a service. Don't dumb down the content either. If people get as far as coming to a church service (or gathering) they'll be expecting something meaningful and challenging. Sometimes it might actually be best not

to change anything, except the attitude of the church regulars. A traditional service where people feel genuinely welcome means much more than a contemporary one where they are ignored. Finally, don't think that being missional necessarily means having no institutions or structures. Some degree of structure is necessary to maintain any group of people in unity and common purpose and institutional features of the church can help to sustain its mission. The important point is to ensure that structures serve the church's mission.

**Q:** What programmes in your church diary could be streamlined to ensure a more missional focus?

#### 4. The missional church studies the culture at every level

Culture has been defined as: <sup>6</sup>

An integrated system of beliefs (about God or reality or ultimate meaning), of values (about what is true, good, beautiful and normative), of customs (how to behave, relate to others, talk, pray, dress, work, play, trade, far, eat, etc.) and of institutions which express these beliefs, values and customs (government, law courts, temples or churches, family, schools, hospitals, factories, shops, unions, clubs, etc.), which binds a society together and gives it a sense of identity, dignity, security, and continuity.

Considering customs and institutions as one level, which we can call 'behaviour', we then have three levels to culture – *beliefs* being the most fundamental, *values* sitting above beliefs and *behaviours* being the most superficial and therefore most visible level. Christians need to be aware of the cultural gap between our Christian 'subculture' and the prevailing culture. We often notice this at the level of *behaviours*, especially the language people use, the way they dress and the patterns of their lives, but we need to look deeper to the level of *values* and *beliefs*. Traditionally churches have not been inclusive of people where the level of behaviour did not conform to the expected norm (smoking, drinking, playing cards, dancing, foul language were all barriers to varying degrees). We need to be more inclusive at this level but more discerning at the deeper level, understanding the personal problems and the values and beliefs that lead to this behaviour. We hope people's behaviour will change to become more positive and healthy but this needs to result from heart change not superficial conformity to our Christian subculture. Once we understand the underlying values and beliefs we can then connect the gospel to them. We are seeking to understand the story that the culture tells – how it explains the world (what is commonly called a 'worldview'). In order to do this we need to learn to watch film and television, read magazines and newspapers and engage in conversations with discernment, being thoughtful and reflective, noticing the values that underlie what people say and what they don't say. We can then identify where culture's stories intersect with the Christian story.

One important aspect of studying the culture is to learn to speak the language of the culture. Overseas missionaries often spend lengthy periods learning the local language. Although we are working with people who speak English we can learn something from mission practice here. We should never assume that people know what we are talking about when we use religious language. We must avoid jargon and explain (but not abandon) biblical terminology. We must not mock or joke about those who differ from us. Our approach should be like that of Jesus, who condemned hypocrites and religious people who failed to obey what they knew to be true but demonstrated compassion to the broken and outcast. We should learn to use self-deprecating irony in how we speak about ourselves rather than sounding arrogant.

**Q:** Think of the last film you watched. What did it say about each of the five movements of the gospel?

#### 5. The missional church proclaims the whole gospel

Having studied the culture we will be able to re-tell the gospel by making connections with the stories in the culture and people's worldviews. You can think this through in terms of five movements of the gospel:

1. **God** made us to know Him and live as stewards of the earth in obedience to His word

<sup>6</sup> Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization. 1978. *Willowbank Report*, p.484



*What do they believe about who they are (identity) and why they are here (purpose)?*

2. **We** rebelled against God's rule in sin, resulting in alienation, suffering and, ultimately, death.

*What do they believe about why there are problems in the world and what happens after death?*

3. **God** has acted through Jesus' death and resurrection to redeem and reconcile a people to Himself.

*Where do they look for a solution to their problems and for redemption?*

4. **We** must respond to God in repentance and faith.

*What do they think a 'good life' is and what duties or responsibilities do they think they have?*

5. **God** will save and change those who trust in Him and bring them to a glorious future as His people.

*Where do they look for power to change and what are their hopes for the future?*

Our aim should be to understand what people's alternative to the gospel is at each of these points, to recognise how the gospel challenges falsehood and fulfils ultimate needs, and to help them move beyond the point in the story where they currently stick through words (apologetics and proclamation) and actions (love and compassion).

In the Christendom era the task of evangelism often entailed calling people to a personal response to Christian truth they already acknowledged. In the Post-Christendom world most people live according to a different worldview or story. We must learn to tell the whole story of the gospel, to communicate the grand biblical story (narrative) of redemption from creation to new creation. The five movements outlined above are a helpful reminder of the broad points of the story, but they will need to be fleshed out. Evangelistic tools that introduce the person of Jesus have proven fruitful, but these are still generally applicable to people who are theistic (believing in God) and who have some identification with a Christian heritage. For the truly unchurched we will need to start further back in the Old Testament in order for Jesus to make sense to them. Likewise, evangelism that ends with the individual promise of Heaven may have been appropriate for people who broadly agreed with Christian ethics and who saw churchgoing as normal, but post-Christian people need to appreciate the life-changing, world-transforming, community-forming implications of redemption that are part and parcel of the biblical gospel.

One other note about the gospel is worth emphasising at this point. There has, rightly, been a strong emphasis in recent years on the need to recapture a more expansive view of the gospel than had traditionally been common among evangelicals in the mid to late twentieth century. The gospel is not simply about the salvation of individuals so that they can 'go to heaven' when they die. It is a grand story of cosmic proportions about God's restoration of all things, a restoration that has begun in the present and will be complete in the future. Hence the reference to the 'whole gospel' in this point. Our telling of the gospel must include truths such as the importance of the church, the community of God's people, and the fact that the whole cosmos (universe) will be restored. A grander telling of the gospel must not, however, lose sight of its heart. At the very centre of the story must be Christ crucified and risen, declared to be Saviour and Lord. He is the centre of all true gospel proclamation – the restoration of all things is in Him, through Him and by Him. Similarly, we must not lose sight of the gospel's challenge and call for an individual response of repentance and faith. A grander vision of the gospel will help people to see that it is primarily God's story and that their salvation draws them into His story, purposes and reign, but this does not lessen the magnitude of personal sin – indeed, it exposes its full extent. The gospel call is a call to repent and it includes the warning that failure to repent, continuation in sin, leaves people under God's judgement and wrath. The gospel is not only the declaration that God has restored all things in Christ; it is a call to repent and acknowledge God's Christ as Lord.

**Q:** What deficiencies are there in the way we traditionally share the 'gospel'?

## 6. The missional church seeks the *shalom* of the neighbourhood

Just as we must not ignore the decline of Christian influence in our society, we must not become defensive or retreat into a comfortable Christian subculture divorced from the wider culture. Our goal, as with the Jewish exiles in Babylon (Jeremiah 29:7), should be to seek the 'wellbeing' (Hebrew *shalom*) of our town or city even though we are strangers here (1 Peter 1:1; 2:11). We realise that God's mission is holistic and that love for the whole person

must mean both a desire to see them come to faith in Christ and to alleviate their social, material and physical problems.

In recent decades there has been significant debate among Evangelical Christians as to the relationship between social action (serving people at the point of their recognised social and physical needs) and evangelism (proclaiming the gospel in the hope that people will repent and believe in Christ). Can the church do one without the other? If we engage in social action how can we avoid appearing as if we are only doing it because we want people to become Christians as opposed to being motivated simply by love for them? How can we expect people to hear our message if they have an empty stomach? Evangelicals have sometimes focused exclusively on evangelism, often arguing that it must be the priority since people are lost without Christ. Some Evangelicals are fearful that if social action becomes too prominent the gospel might be neglected and the church might become liberal. Tim Keller (2001) suggests that missional churches must be more deeply committed to social justice than traditional liberal churches and to evangelism than traditional fundamentalist churches. His suggestion reflects the growing consensus among Evangelicals that both social action and evangelism are important and that to neglect either would seriously compromise our mission. We must proclaim the Kingdom and demonstrate the Kingdom. We must speak of Christ and model Christ. We must tell people of the love of God and embrace them with His love. We must explain that God is just and holy and seek justice in a holy manner. We must confess that Jesus Christ is Lord and obey Him by showing love to our neighbour. Christians should volunteer in whatever initiatives are best placed to improve the lives of people in our neighbourhood. At times we may need to start initiatives for social action where there are none already or where involvement prohibits us from sharing our faith, but we must think carefully about this and avoid duplicating what is already happening wherever possible.

Tim Chester and Steve Timmis (*Everyday Church*, p.48-49) suggest the following questions to stimulate missional thinking about your neighbourhood and cultural context:

#### **Where?**

- Where are the places and activities in which you can meet people ('the missional spaces')?
- Where do people experience community?
- Are there existing social networks with which we can engage, or do we need to find ways of creating community within a neighbourhood?
- *Where* should you be to have missional opportunities?

#### **When?**

- What are the patterns and timescales of your neighbourhood ('the missional rhythm')?
- When are the times when you can connect with people ('the missional moments')?
- How do people organize their time?
- What cultural experiences and celebrations do people value? How might these be used as bridges to the gospel?
- *When* should you be available to have missional opportunities?

#### **What?**

- What are people's fears, hopes and hurts?
- What 'gospel' stories are told in the neighbourhood?
- What gives people identity (creation)? How do they account for wrong in the world (fall)? What is their solution (redemption)? What are their hopes (consummation)?
- What are the barrier beliefs or assumptions that cause people to dismiss the gospel?
- What sins will the gospel first confront and heal?
- In what ways are people self-righteous?
- What is the good news for people in this neighbourhood?
- What will church look like for people in this neighbourhood?

**Q:** How can your church genuinely seek the welfare of your city without compromising on proclaiming the gospel?

## 7. The missional church speaks publically from powerlessness

We can no longer expect people to accept Christian values without questioning or call them back to biblical standards. We can, and should, engage in political and public discourse (to fail to do so may be a denial of the universal nature of Christ's lordship) but in a way that first and foremost demonstrates our concern for social justice and for the oppressed, in true love and humility. In fact, we should probably engage more fully than ever in public dialogue and debate since we can't assume that there is a default to the Christian position. What we cannot do is expect to win the case through innate respect for church or Christianity. We must make a case as to why this policy is best for people as well as why it reflects the fact of Christ's lordship. We must always be ready to back up our pronouncements with compassionate action. We should question ideologies such as nationalism (including Unionism in the Northern Ireland context) and capitalism not simply on grounds of what works best or what comes naturally to us but in terms of what is most compatible with Christ's Lordship. We will have to think increasingly carefully about when and whether it is appropriate to receive funding from the State for Christian activities (especially if increasing restrictions are placed on proclamation) but we should also seize opportunities to make up for deficiencies in State provision. With the current economic uncertainty it is possible that we will have increased opportunities to play a role in serving others where the State can no longer afford to.

**Q:** How would a missional church deal with an issue like homosexuality?

## 8. The missional church is an authentic kingdom community

The world cannot replicate the kind of reconciling, forgiving love that the Spirit of God produces. We must apply the gospel (the reality of the cross and resurrection which leads us to expect suffering and victory and to live in grace and freedom) not simply to our understanding of salvation but also to the way we relate to one another in the church. We will be authentic, recognising that the modern world is suspicious of spin and sick of marketing. We will not present ourselves as a 'product' to be bought but as a family to become at home among. We will set a high standard for discipleship in the church (a constant draw towards increasing Christ-likeness) but a low bar for association with it (a Christ-like commitment to the outcasts and sinners). People will be able to belong even if they don't believe yet, but there will always be a tension drawing them towards faith in Christ – they will not feel that they belong fully. They will feel as if they are living among aliens, but friendly aliens. Those who don't believe won't be expected to behave like believers, but there will be a positive support and encouragement for believers to behave in keeping with the gospel and where they fail to do so there will be loving care, warnings and even discipline where necessary. We will welcome people to experience this community of grace and truth – this, rather than events and programmes, will be the mainstay of the 'attractional' dimension of our mission. Where a sense of community is lacking in our neighbourhoods we will also seek to promote it.

**Q:** How can you move your church further towards being authentic Christian community?

## 9. The missional church encourages and equips believers for everyday mission

We need to train believers to be missional in their workplace and communities. This needs to be the focus of those who serve the church in supported ministry – they must be primarily equippers as opposed to 'doers'. We must value ministry in the workplace and through work on a par with ministry in the church and learn to engage in our vocation in a distinctively Christian way. To make this possible we must down the 'sacred-secular divide' so that believers see all of life as worship and service to the Lord. We can help believers to see how the things they already do present opportunities for sharing the gospel. We should also hear about, celebrate and pray for the 'nine-to-five' lives of believers when we gather as church. Church should not feel like an add-on to our already busy lives (another ball to juggle) but an invaluable resource to inspire us, strengthen us and resource us to be more effective in the other aspects of life. Coming into the gathering of the church should feel like coming home at the end of an exhausting day at work. Where people have particularly taxing jobs or are going through particularly busy spells there should be understanding that they may not commit as much time and effort to church activities – they will not

be judged for it. Missional church values the concept of every-member ministry, but it expands the understanding of ministry beyond the activities done in the name of the church into everything that we do in all of life.

The activities of the church when it gathers will recognise the centrality of equipping people for a missional lifestyle. This is equivalent to saying that everything the church does will be about discipleship – making followers of Jesus who live out His calling in every part of life. Leaders will be equippers who influence others to a missional lifestyle by modelling it and teaching it. They will recognise that their greatest responsibility is to keep the flock faithful to the gospel – ensuring that gospel truth is applied into every question, problem, challenge and success in every part of the lives of God’s people. Fellowship, whether in small groups or as a large group, will incorporate stories from real life and teaching will apply Scripture into these stories. Parents will be helped to teach their children the gospel and to base family life around missional rhythms so that children learn to be selfless and to serve others in love. Children’s and youth ministries will centre on gospel values rather than moralising or entertainment.

Blogger Jonathan Dobson <sup>7</sup> suggests the following eight ways to easily be missional:

1. *Eat with non-Christians* – at work, eating out, at home (even if it’s just a takeaway).
2. *Walk, don’t Drive* – say hello to people, strike up conversations, look for needs, pray for insights.
3. *Be a Regular* – use the same petrol station, hairdresser, coffee shop, grocery store. Seek to build relationships.
4. *Hobby with non-Christians* – Be prayerful. Be intentional. Be winsome. Have fun. *Be yourself*.
5. *Talk to your co-workers* – take breaks with intentionality, go out after work, show an interest in their lives.
6. *Volunteer with voluntary groups* – give a day a week or a day a month to serve your town / city.
7. *Participate in community events* – go to fundraisers, festivals, car boot sales, summer shows, concerts. Strike up conversation. Study the culture. Reflect on what you see and hear. Pray.
8. *Serve your neighbours* – by gardening, building a cabinet, fixing a car, setting up neighbourhood watch.

These suggestions might seem very simple, but they are great ways to begin to be more aware and intentional about your life as an engagement in God’s mission without having to make drastic changes. You can do all of them as an individual (or a family), but the impact will be multiplied if you start to think and act missionally as a church.

**Q:** What things already in your daily, weekly or monthly routine could you turn into missional opportunities by doing them with a nonbeliever (ideally together with someone else from your church as well)?

## 10. The missional church supports mobile gospel workers locally and overseas

In a time of rapid change we need to release people with gifting to work cross-culturally in evangelism and community engagement. It is probably helpful to call these people ‘missionaries’ since they will have the same gifts and training as overseas missionaries.<sup>8</sup> We should find other ways to support people in Christian ministry beyond the traditional ‘church employee’ model (one church pays someone’s full salary). We should consider workers supported by several churches and individuals in a town and ‘bivocational workers’ (‘tentmaking’ as well as having some support from the church). This is useful for churches that are smaller, either because of decline in numbers or because of a deliberate decision to stay small and reproduce frequently, but is also allows church workers to be more connected with non-believers and with wider society. These workers will not be the traditional pastor or minister. They will be able to communicate the gospel clearly and effectively to people in the culture and to think creatively and strategically about what could be. We can rediscover the dual approach that Paul describes in

<sup>7</sup> Dobson, Jonathan. 2009. ‘8 Ways to Easily Be Missional’, <<http://churchplantingnovice.wordpress.com/2009/04/07/8-ways-to-easily-be-missional/>> [accessed 15 Jan 2012]

<sup>8</sup> In earlier versions of this document I talked about all Christians learning to be ‘missionaries’, but I now suggest that it is better to reserve the term because we will need to recognise some people who have been specially given to the church by Christ for the task of missional innovation and development.

Colossians 4 – mobile missionary teams supported by and providing support to local missional churches. These mobile teams would need to work in close cooperation with local churches but would also need to have freedom to engage in mission in a flexible way in response to changing situations, including the freedom to start new local churches where appropriate. Unlike Paul's team, which worked in virgin territory where the gospel had not yet been proclaimed and the church was not present, these mobile teams will need to remember that the church is already present. However deficient they might judge it to be, they are still one with the existing church. Where there is a need for new congregations and fresh expressions of church to begin they will do so as part of the family – aware of the whole church and desiring unity. The mobile teams will be aware of the existing church in the area and will work towards maintaining relationships between various expressions of church in that locality.

The idea of mobile missionary teams is familiar to many from the 'mission fields' overseas. We need to learn from these contexts about how mission can advance and churches can be supported locally. As we do so, however, we must remain open to the Spirit's leading to reach people across cultures and to send people and resources in appropriate ways to global mission. It is a strange irony that some missional church writers have emphasised God's initiative in mission but have written about missional church as if the Western church has no ongoing responsibility to engage in mission beyond its own context. The ultimate horizon of God's mission is all nations and all peoples. We should expect that God will call some missional Christians to cross cultures and continents as He directs His mission.

**Q:** How might you and your church be part of supporting gospel workers locally?

## **11. The missional church eats and celebrates with people**

Scripture, and especially the example of Jesus, bears ample testimony to the power of the meal to bridge gaps, create relationships and open hearts and minds. We must move away from the traditional approach to 'hospitality' in which we aim to impress to an approach which aims to bless. You want your guests to experience a taste of what it means to be 'at home'. That might mean doing less tidying and less preparation. You might even order a takeaway rather than digging out your recipe book. Another fantastic opportunity for missional relationships is to celebrate with people when the community is celebrating – school concerts and bazaars, mayor's parades, community festivals, etc. So long as there is no compromise of the gospel then why not be at the heart of these events? You can do this even if it happens on a Sunday or clashes with a church event – just cancel that event and get involved!

**Q:** How could your church be at the centre of an upcoming community celebration?

## **12. The missional church demonstrates genuine unity**

In the Christendom era churches were able to compete over the same Christian people on the basis of distinctives of church government, doctrine or the programmes they could offer. Whatever we think of the appropriateness of the numerous different denominations and independent churches that resulted, we must recognise that this simply can't be the right way forward in post-Christendom. We must find ways to appreciate our distinctives but find a greater unity in the core beliefs that we share. Given the number of Christians here, churches in Northern Ireland can still grow by 'transfers' (Christians moving from one church to another) but this is not gospel growth and it serves to remove Christian people further away from their local communities and to make the church increasingly middle class (how can you travel to a church far from your home on a Sunday morning unless you have a car?) It also sends a message of disunity and competitiveness to those who are closed to church. We must stop acting competitively with other churches, avoid attacking other churches, and have a bias towards partnering with other churches in local cooperation. We should also consider removing denominational terms from our name or literature and signage and playing down the tendency to brand and market our churches in ways that set them against other churches.

Sadly, much writing on the missional church neglects an emphasis on unity. The church has long been plagued by too narrow a view of its own identity and missional church thinking must not be allowed to be seen as the latest way to sustain the survival of our own local congregation. The missional church is a servant church – sent in the same posture of servanthood as Jesus (John 20:21). It does not seek glory, recognition or praise for itself, but seeks to point to Jesus. It is not concerned with its own growth, but with the faithfulness of its testimony to the reality of God's Kingdom. It is not judgemental and self-aware, but joyfully abandoned in its celebration of God's grace and the hope of His coming restoration of the universe.

**Q:** How can your congregation proactively demonstrate and practice unity with the wider Church in the gospel?

## Inspiration from the Pre-Christendom Church

In 100 AD there were somewhere between 15 and 25 thousand Christians in the Roman Empire (0.025 to 0.04% of the population). By 313 AD there were between 9 and 20 million (15 to 33% of the population). During this period:

- Christianity was illegal and Christians faced regular persecution
- They had no church buildings, no professional clergy, no denominational support, no theological colleges
- A high standard was set for membership of the church based on rigorous catechesis

How did this remarkable growth come about?

- The sovereign action of the Holy Spirit and power of the gospel Word (see Acts 6:7; 12:24; 13:49; 19:20).
- The faithful embodiment of the gospel in **both** mobile mission teams (like Paul's) **and** local missional churches.

Once again we must recognise, as we discovered in our study of Colossians 4:2-6, that mission begins with God but that it requires the people of God if it is to continue in the world.

Sociologist Rodney Stark (1996, *The Rise of Christianity*), studying the remarkable growth of the church in the first centuries AD from the perspective of human actions alone, proposes some reasons for the growth:

- Faced with major epidemics in the Roman world, Christians reacted differently than pagans – they refused to flee the cities, they cared for (rather than abandoning) relatives who were sick, and they cared for non-Christians who were sick where resources permitted. This had the dual result that Christians were more likely to survive the epidemics and that other people were attracted by their faith and hope and converted.
- Fertility was higher among Christians because they had a higher view of marriage and sex and they did not engage in the practice of abortion and infanticide (especially of girls) that was widespread in Roman society.
- The presence of Christian communities revitalised the cities (where Christian faith was concentrated) by providing nursing in face of disasters, welcome for ethnic minorities, hospitality to the homeless and charity to the poor.

Could these factors play a part in the mission of the Church in the Post-Christendom West? As the State becomes less able to provide the full range of social care that twentieth century Europeans came to expect (assuming that the economies of Europe continue to struggle in the future this seems highly likely) there will be new opportunities for the church to fill the gaps. The early Christians had none of the advantages of resources and privilege that the Christendom church had, yet by faithfully living out and sharing the gospel they impacted the world in dramatic ways. We may learn from their example, but it will require a greater level of commitment, a greater investment of self and resources and a readiness to face opposition than has traditionally been seen in our churches. That is no bad thing, for it will draw us back to the very heart of Christian discipleship – the call to deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow Jesus.

## FURTHER READING

Chester, Tim and Steve Timmis. 2011. *Everyday Church: Mission by Being Good Neighbours* (Nottingham: IVP)

A thought-provoking and highly practical guide to mission in everyday life based on a study of 1 Peter and drawing on the authors' experience in the church in Sheffield, England, in which they are leaders.

Goheen, Michael W. 2011. *A Light to the Nations: The Missional Church and the Biblical Story* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic)

A helpful overview of the theme of mission throughout Scripture, providing a firm biblical basis for the missional church. Goheen also provides thirteen valuable practical applications for the contemporary church.

Murray, Stuart. 2004. *Church After Christendom* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster)

A proposal for church in the post-Christendom period that comes from a UK perspective and draws on the experience of many churches and thinkers in Britain.

Murray, Stuart. 2004. *Post-Christendom* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster)

In this book Murray analyses the rise and fall of Christendom and its ongoing legacy in terms that are, as may be expected given his Anabaptist identity, highly critical of churches that are not 'believers' churches'.

Newbigin, Lesslie. 1986. *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans)

A classic in which this veteran missionary and mission thinker considers the ways in which Western culture, despite its Christian influences, is at variance with the gospel.

Newbigin, Lesslie. 1989. *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (London: SPCK)

An extensive analysis of the pluralistic culture that Newbigin saw developing in Britain and challenging proposals about how the church might faithfully respond to it.

Keller, Tim. 2001. 'Missional Church' <[http://redeemercitycity.com/content/com.redeemer.digitalContentArchive.LibraryItem/17/The\\_Missional\\_Church.pdf](http://redeemercitycity.com/content/com.redeemer.digitalContentArchive.LibraryItem/17/The_Missional_Church.pdf)>

A brief document in which Keller, a church planter and leader in New York, makes some practical proposals about how the church can be missional in a post-Christendom society.

Smith, David. 2003. *Mission After Christendom* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd)

Through examining the message of several paintings this British mission thinker considers the landscape of the post-Christendom in a book that raises many pertinent questions.

Stark, Rodney. 1996. *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries* (New York: HarperOne)

A sociologist considers in very readable form the reasons why Christianity flourished in the early centuries after Christ. Although not written for this purpose, his findings may prove helpful in thinking about mission after Christendom.