

Discuss ecclesiology in a theology of mission and the practice of youth ministry

Introduction

Youth ministry, like any profession, operates in a context. In the United Kingdom, the church and Christian agencies have become the biggest employers of youth workers. Yet in his latest research, Peter Brierley highlights the seemingly increasing drain of young people from churches of all denominations. His estimate is about 1000 children and young people leave church every week (Brierley 2000). Somehow the church, despite its investment, seems to be still losing ground. For many of these workers meeting the expectations of their employing church is one of the biggest frustrations in their mission amongst young people. Most sense that ecclesiology, some form of gathered community, is intrinsic or important to the Christian faith. Yet for many, experience of the gathered faithful leaves them feeling disillusioned for themselves. For young people either inside the church to "stick with it" and more especially for young people outside its structures and socialising norms, to engage meaningfully, seems an expectation of the youth worker and young people which, as highlighted by the statistics, they often feel unable to meet. The result is that "The present youthwork scene is characterised by considerable discussion concerning youth congregations or youth churches." (Ward 1997 p 116). This paper seeks to explore why and suggest ecclesiastical ways forward.

The context for this paper is mission. Its assumption is the same as Dave Tomlinson in the Post Evangelical, that the Christian faith in essence is a communal faith (Tomlinson 1995). The paper begins therefore with these three elements; ecclesiology, mission and the world of young people. Indeed Bosch goes so far as to say that "today one of the strongest impulses towards the renewal of the theological concept of church comes from the theology of mission." (Bosch 1996 p 369)

The paper will begin by looking at mission and the church's role. Beginning with the Jesus, Paul, and the early church, I shall explore different historical and theological models of church and mission. I shall then move on to explore different theological and practical ways the church has been thought and about and modeled. Using the backdrop of two different perspectives from Mike Riddell and Rodney Clapp, along with other insights, I will critique the western church in its ability to mission, before concluding in the light of youth ministry. It will be the contention of this paper that there are differing models, different ways of thinking about church and that some ways of producing ecclesiastical theologies and models are more helpful than others to mission in the current cultural context.

The Church in Mission

"Mission is so much at the heart of the church's life that, rather than think of it as one aspect of its existence, it is better to think of it as defining its essence. The Church is by nature missionary to the extent that if it ceases to be missionary, it has ceased being Church. Thus the Church's self-understanding and sense of identity (its ecclesiology) is inherently bound up with its call to share and live out the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the ends of the earth and the end of time." (Kirk 1999)

Of great theological significance in the development of mission thinking during the twentieth century was the development of *missio Dei*, that activity begins with the missionary nature and activity of God. The debate has become the relationship between this, the world, and the church. In the light of this new thinking during the twentieth century, there has been an attempt to recover the mission thinking and strategies of Jesus, Paul, and the early church. Donovan believes that one should approach mission without having a whole host of preconceptions including ecclesiastical ones. However, this does not preclude his emphasis on the communal nature of the faith. Indeed he learns from the Masai village when he tried to separate those who could be baptised, historically the ritual symbolising access to membership of Christ's Church. The village elders pointed out to Donovan that they had decided to follow Jesus as a community. Donovan could only respond by helping them developing loose structures of a worshipping church life for themselves. As he himself stated several times, "the Gospel is the task of the missionary, the interpretation the task of the people." (Donovan 1982 p 190) For him this positively included their ecclesiastical life in the light of the Gospel. (Donovan 1982)

So, what was Jesus' desire and intention with regard to what we call "church?" Much of this debate centers on whether Jesus intended starting a new religion. "Jesus foretold the kingdom and it was the Church which came." (Bosch 1996 p 50) Whilst he is quoting several theologians, Bosch's theme is the move from mission to consolidation, grace to law, the fixing of frontiers rather than crossing them, from life to doctrine, from movement to institution. For Bosch mission in the New Testament manifests itself in the new relationship which came into being in the community, never a separate religious institution. He does however offer us a clue as to how the early church can offer us a way forward.

"In the early stages there is an indication of two separate types of ministry developing: the settled ministry of bishops or elders and deacons and the mobile ministry of apostles, prophets and evangelists. The first tended to push early Christianity toward becoming an institution; the second retained the dynamic of a movement. In early years in Antioch there

was still a creative tension between the two types of ministry. Paul and Barnabas were at the same time leaders in the local church and itinerant missionaries." (Bosch 1996 p 51)

His proposal is that perhaps institution and movement, church and mission may not be the exclusive categories we so often think they are.

Kirk believes that Jesus did have, as a central part of his ministry, the development of a renewed community and throughout the gospel records he uses imagery to describe the gathering of people he is bringing about. The community would fulfill Israel's calling to be a light to the nations that salvation may reach the ends of the earth by proclaiming the kingdom through a community within every community who believed that Jesus was God's final agent of salvation. The characteristics of this renewed community would be indiscriminate love, unconditional trust in God, distinctive behaviour based on the Sermon on the Mount with a fresh vision of God leading to a distinctive lifestyle, the discipline of discipleship, and resources within the community as being more powerful than that which could be achieved through individuals.

"To divorce mission from life in the community is to deprive oneself of just those resources which make mission in the way of Christ possible...Those who have abandoned the Church have cut themselves off from the gift of life...The Church lives in God and with God which gives Christians the right to do things which others say is impossible or futile." (Kirk 1996 p 213)

Bosch makes a similar point with regard to the theology of Paul when he describes the church as the "body of Christ" with individual gifts working together for God's purposes for the community in mission.

Bosch makes an important, if obvious point, that Paul spent much of his time establishing churches and building them up. Indeed the New Testament from Acts to Revelation is the story of the early church. Paul's letters are all to churches not individuals. Both Bosch and Leslie Newbigin make the helpful point that Paul's mission strategy was to plant and grow churches before leaving them to be the focus for mission in that geographical area or city. In Romans 15 v 23, Paul says that from Jerusalem to the Adriatic there is "no longer any room for work in these regions." As Newbigin points out this was not because mission had been completed with all peoples converted or all social and economic ills eradicated, but because the focus for mission, the church, had been established, communities of men and women who believed the gospel and lived by it. As Bosch points out these were in strategic centres from which mission would take place. "The life and work of the Christian community are

intimately bound up with God's cosmic-historical plan for the redemption of the universe." (Bosch p 55)

For Newbigin in particular the central point of mission to both Jesus and Paul was not the saving of individual souls but the fulfillment of universal history. (Newbigin 1989) As Bosch highlights, for Paul, the Church was the community of the end-time which gives it a tremendous significance for the here and now. The Church were pockets of alternative lifestyle which pointed to the reign of God, a body of people which pointed the way to a universal community at the end of time. The church therefore carried within it the seeds of revolution for the structures of society whilst labouring in solidarity with the world, groaning for the redemption of the entire world. (Bosch 1996)

"Missionary proclamations in Acts were not the unilateral initiative of the apostles but in response to questions asked by others, questions prompted by the presence of something which calls for explanation...we are not to address the real questions which people are asking – the problem is the worlds questions are not the questions which lead to life, instead where the church is faithful people begin to ask the questions to which the Gospel is the answer." (Newbigin 1989 p 119)

Paul did not exhort the churches to mission but to faithfulness, the Church was not part of the answer, it was the answer. People would be attracted or put off by the conduct of the church. "Paul never develops an ecclesiology which can be divorced from christology and eschatology...it is the beginning of a new age, the dawning of a new age in the midst of the old, and as such the vanguard of God's new world." (Bosch 1996 p 169)

Surprisingly Alistair McGrath makes little of the development of ecclesiology in the early church, indeed he comments that it was not a major issue. He says the early consensus revolved around four points, which the conversion of Constantine changed. The church was seen as a spiritual society which replaced the nation of Israel as the people of God in the world, that all Christians were made one in Christ despite different origins and background. The Church was the repository of true Christian teaching, and the Church gathered the faithful together to enable them to grow in faith and holiness. (McGrath 1994)

In light of all that we have said above McGrath is limited. I believe that ecclesiology, not necessarily in institutional terms, but as redeemed communities central to the continuing mission of Jesus, was a central part of the thinking, especially of Paul. Strong theologies of ecclesiology were developed in the New Testament and beyond. I conclude this section with Bosch as to the importance of this discussion.

"The New Testament witnesses assume the possibility of a community of people who, in the face of the tribulations they encounter, keep their eyes steadfastly on the reign of God by praying for its coming, by being its disciples, by proclaiming its presence, by working for peace and justice in the midst of hatred and oppression, and by looking and working towards God's liberating future. A careful study of the New Testament and the early church may help us to come to greater clarity about what mission meant then and might mean today." (Bosch 1996 p54)

Models of Ecclesiology

For many the Church is an obstacle to spirituality. Mark Pierson recalls a high school reunion where he was amazed to discover the spiritual yearnings and exploration of those he had grown up with, yet for none of them the Church, including the one he was minister of, was a place for that spiritual journey to be developed. (Kirkpatrick, Pierson, Riddell 2000) For many youth workers the same issue is raised. However, it is the contention of this paper that, as we reflect on Jesus, Paul, the early church, church history and the history of mission, there are many different theological ecclesiastical models, some of which are more helpful to mission thinking than others.

Kirk is very positive about Church. "The Church...intentionally bears witness to the meaning and relevance of the kingdom, while not itself being identical with that kingdom. It is called to the risky task of being the living interpretation of that kingdom; in its worshipping life it is an emissary of the kingdom; in its work for reconciliation, peace and justice it is an instrument of the kingdom." (Kirk 1999 p 36)

He comments however, that the Church has often chosen inappropriate models for mission. These include the Church as the "ark of salvation", the safe haven into which people may escape the perplexities and dangers of a hostile and difficult world. In this mode the Church sees any substantial change as a threat, a surrender to forces hostile to its core self-understanding. Another is the fear of contamination, often quoting "come ye out from among them." This has meant no political, economic or social involvement with the world and its agencies. Another is triumphalism where the Church monopolises, domesticates or imposes God. Finally he highlights the failure to live up to its principles and uses the example of the way women have been treated. Helpfully he highlights the theological debate that has occurred over the twentieth century in response to these models. Some models retain the Church-centered missiology of the past two centuries where Gods purposes are assumed to only be fulfilled through the Church. The result is a great emphasis on planting self-

supporting, self-governing and self-propagating churches. On the other hand the development of *missio Dei* has seen some theologies bypass the Church altogether. It is God's activity in the world that is the clue to his mission.

"Previous patterns of mission viewed the church as the bearer of God's mission to the world; now the world became the focal point with the church responding to people's search for humanisation evident in situations of injustice, racial hatred, loneliness, and other personal crises. In this study mission became identified with participation in programs for urban renewal, the civil rights movement and in community development projects." (Kirk 1999 p 53)

Much of the same debate and polarisation has been seen in the youthwork world, often along the lines of inside out and outside in work. Kirk, and I would agree for youth ministry, comes down on the side of a positive attitude towards ecclesiology.

"The Church exists in mission because the restoration of a damaged humanity to wholeness can only happen in community. Because God's offer of salvation is universal (1 Timothy 2v3), the community which experiences the true meaning of life has to be universal as well. There is no other body which has the potential for demonstrating, across every possible divide, the healing of the wounds caused by hate, deception, selfishness and brutality." (Kirk 1999 p 207)

What of other ecclesiastical models? "We have to ask if it is fair to expect a movement to survive only as a movement. Either the movement disintegrates or it becomes an institution – this is simply a sociological law." (Bosch 1996 p 52) Kirk comments that the "experience of two thousand years suggests that much of the institution will remain immobile...The maintenance of institutions – whether buildings, structures, forms of training, societies or liturgical practices – will take priority over mission." (Kirk 1999 p 233) Whilst some see the institution negatively and call for the return of Christianity to being a movement, Pete Ward gives us an alternative framework. He highlights six basic elements to the institutional church he sees as positive. Tradition, the passing on of the story whilst acting as a corrective to excesses, longevity, thus ensuring the social movement and the story survives, organisation, universality, so keeping a sense of a world wide faith open to all, legitimacy for innovation and creativity, and fellowship. (Ward 1997)

Ward does not stop at the institution. His contention is that from the days of the early Church, alongside the Church as institution has been the Church as community group and the Church as missionary project. All three, however, are legitimate ecclesiastically. These three he sees as being able to exist either sequentially or simultaneously. For instance in Acts the

church moves from missionary to community group to institution. His argument is that it is important that each of these three is expressed in every town or locality. He identifies the difficulty for youthwork. "Youth ministry must take the Church much more seriously. The problem for many youth ministers is that the institution of the Church in this country has tended to locate all three aspects of the Church's life in its own structures. The result is control which serves institutional ends rather than developing new forms of worship or social engagement." He goes on to say,

"...the local church in recent times has tended to see itself as the focus of missionary work in an area. The idea of independent missionary projects has been discouraged as churches have increased their staff numbers by appointing their own workers. The policy, particularly in youth ministry, has been for churches to try and cover both the needs of the children of Christian parents and some strategy for outreach in one appointment. This means that incarnated patterns of ministry have often been neglected." (Ward 1997 p 124)

Others have developed ways of talking about Church. Avery Dulles in 1976 identified five major ecclesiastical types – institution, Body of Christ, sacrament, herald, servant. (Bosch 1996) The Isaiah Vision by Raymond Fung gives a different perspective.

"There are many Christian organisations and missionary societies which engage in evangelism and the promotion of evangelism...But at the end of the day it is the local congregation, in its life and ministry, that must address the task of witnessing to Jesus Christ before every person and in every neighbourhood, day in and day out, year in and year out. It is at the heart of Christian mission to foster the multiplication of local congregations in every human community." (Fung 1992 p vii)

Although he places mission within the one context, he describes the Church as partnership, worship, and discipleship. By sharing the Isaiah Agenda, based on Isaiah 65 v 20-23, of social justice in solidarity with people, they are invited to move on into authentic worship and discipleship by the worshipping community giving account of the "hope which is within them." (1 Peter 3 v 15) This is in contrast with Ward's threefold model of Church. Certainly in the British context, Fung fails to take into account the question of contextualisation and culture. Yes a congregation in every culture, but each community is often a proliferation of several cultures. As culture is the way we understand the world, to mission directly from one cultural context, the church, to a myriad of sub cultures, I do not believe is viable or biblical. His threefold aspect to the life of a local congregation and the openness of each to the community that surrounds it, does have something positive to say to youth ministry. We meet young people at their point of need, standing with them as they encounter a world that often

discriminates or is difficult for them, but invite them onwards into a life of worship and discipleship within the same relational context.

Ward has also developed a critique of a modern way of thinking about church life within the evangelical church in the UK, the Church as family. He does see some positive aspects to this. "Church acting as a family can provide role models which can bring about change through relationships." (Ward 1996 p 145) As Middleton and Walsh positively state, "Truth is sought and found in community." (Middleton and Walsh 1995) Ward says this way of thinking about church has become the focus for many evangelical clergy, lay people, parents, and youth workers in their thinking about Christian spirituality and mission. In the early 1960's family services began to be experimented with. Ward comments on the effect this has had on youth ministry, the main result being a growing experimentation with youth services, congregations or church because the church as family is so alien to many young people. The following are for Ward the consequences of a family way of thinking about church. He includes the loss of diversity, pressure to attend, control and attendance, parental expectations i.e. young people don't want to do stuff with their parents but the parents are embarrassed in their children are not "in church". He goes on to identify a confusion between family and God when teenagers need space to develop their own identity and relationship to family structures, the lack of space to ask questions, and finally cultural imperialism as a common culture is bred which becomes a stumbling block to mission. Ward comments,

"The family emphasis of modern church life has had a considerable impact on the ability of the evangelical churches to reach out to the unchurched...The children of family members are seen as more important, or in need of being cared for first...The problem becomes, however, when people who are socially unacceptable seek entry to the church or to the youth group...In these ways the feel of the modern church has tended to isolate Christian youth work and keep it 'in the family'...The future agenda of those working with young people it seems, will increasingly focus on developing patterns of church life which are able to embrace cultural change and diversity whilst maintaining a gospel commitment to the unity of the church." (Ward 1996 p 158)

These models highlight the difficulty in youth ministry of working from church based on one ecclesiastical model to young people who do not fit that model. Those models may have their role within the preservation of the Christian story but does this highlight the need for alternative ecclesiastical models for mission to young people? Does Ward's contention of differing ecclesiastical structures within an area give us a minimal starting point? If this is true as we have explored then where from here?

A Need for the New?

We come back to the fundamental issue. Despite huge investment, the Church is still failing to engage with the majority of young people in a way that enables them to appropriate and grow up in the faith. Both Mike Riddell and Rodney Clapp critique the western church in its ability to mission.

"The Christian Church is dying in the West. This painful fact is the cause of a great deal of avoidance by the Christian community... It is a moment of decision and extreme risk when the community of Christ must slough off its previous paradigm of life in order that the new may emerge...This is a time which call for courage and experimentation...I think this is the call of God to the western church at the end of the second millenium: to change or die."
(Riddell 1998 pp. 1 & 2)

As he points out with Mark Pierson and Cathy Kirkpatrick this is not simply an issue of failing to engage with those outside the Church.

"There is something interesting happening in the Christian community across the western world. Very quietly and unobtrusively, one group of believers is growing on a daily basis. Soon the numbers will be such that they cannot be ignored. Who are they? They're the Christians who don't go to church any more...But for every Christian who used to attend church but now does not, there are many more who grit their teeth of a Sunday and endure a service for the sake of making some obvious commitment to the community of Christ."
(Kirkpatrick, Pierson, Riddell 2000 p 1)

Clapp agrees with Riddell that there is a major issue to be faced. Both quote a story from Henri Nouwen as chaplain to the Holland America Line. As the boat he was on tried to steer into harbour through the fog, he was told by the Captain he was in the way. The Captain then changed his mind and expressed that this was the only time he may need the Chaplain. Nouwen reflected that "there was a time, not too long ago when we felt like Captains running our own ships...Now we are standing in the way." (Riddell 1998 p 6) Both use this story to explain the cultural paradigm shift into a post-modern, post Christian west where the plausibility structures for institutional Christianity have been undermined.

Clapp argues for a very different response to Riddell. He argues for a return to a pre-Constantinian church in a post Constantinian age away from the formal links between church and state. "Evangelism in a non-Constantinian setting requires that Christians understand witness as corporate and not only or even primarily individual...Non Constantinian non-

believers will attend Christian claims when they catch glimpses of a way of life that somehow challenges the way of life they already know and find to be lacking in one manner or another...Christians must remember that our message is not a message which could be separated from the embodied message that the church always is." (Clapp 1996 p 168)

Clapp believes that we need to see the church as a cultural entity forming an alternative form of lifestyle. "A culture...is a way of life. It forms and shapes people into a distinctive community." (Clapp 1996 p 94) His solution is not separation but engagement as an alternative, distinctive, and challenging culture, rather than the Constantinian view of official religion as a glue to hold society together. The "Constantinian church for many centuries responded to the world in such a manner that it lost sense of itself as an alternative way of life...After Constantine, on the other side of modernity, we can regard and embrace the church as a way of life." (Clapp 1996 p 94)

Riddell is not so optimistic about the ability of the church to reform itself, to be so critically self aware. He is in substantial agreement with Dave Tomlinson, who says,

"The whole backdrop to the Christian gospel is the organised church and, sadly, this is the biggest stumbling block of all to the post-modern onlooker...The uncomfortable truth is that the Church has been all too eager to adopt the secular standards and practices of the prevailing western culture. The result is people see in the church just more of what they see and reject in the outside world; hierarchies, beauracacies and power struggles. They know that this is not what will bring them personal spiritual fulfillment." (Tomlinson 1995 p 144)

Both Tomlinson and Riddell encourage new forms of ecclesiology to emerge. They speak out of experience, Riddell with Planet Earth in New Zealand and Tomlinson with Holy Joe's in a London pub. Riddell believes the western church is in survival mode making it conservative, exclusive, orthodox, static, careful and scrupulous as this is how institutions survive. This is incompatible with a missionary church, which he says needs to be open, flexible, experimental, dynamic, and energetic. Riddell has a strong sense of missio Dei,

"understanding that the mission of God precedes and creates the church. The church is invited to respond and participate, but it neither possesses nor controls mission. The Spirit is at work in the world, drawing the world towards Christ; actively luring people who have no contact with the institutional church." (Riddell 1998 p 118)

He quotes the story of John Drane at Dumblane with a group of young people trying to make sense of the tragedy that had just occurred there. In a moving tale of redemption and change amongst the group at the moment he engaged with them, Drane asks the question:

“What would our churches have to look like to create a space to accept and encourage the growth of the kind of spirituality I met that night on a cold pavement in Dumblane...is the community of Christ open enough to receive those among whom God is already working? (Riddell 1998 p 36)

The ecclesiastical question posed by the debate in this section is not whether gathering is important to Christian faith. It is whether to bring change through new forms of ecclesiology or renewal of the old, to engage with the world as an alternative society or in solidarity believing God is already there, to work with cultural groups or sponsor multi cultural ecclesiology. Clapp is attractive in one sense but fails to see cultural expression of faith within an overall value system of kingdom values. Thus kingdom values of an alternative community may be a driving force, but the life of that community will need to be expressed from differing cultural frameworks. Riddell and Tomlinson may be critiqued on their lack of recognition for the value of the institutional framework, but I find myself in much more sympathy with their notions of alternative communities, which are open at the edges and positive about the activity of God in culture.

Conclusion

We have discussed historical ecclesiology and its role in mission, looked at different ecclesiastical models and ways of thinking about Church, and examined the western church and its struggle to engage with mission in a post-modern, post Christian society. So, what can we conclude?

Firstly, no one is disputing the importance of ecclesiology, the gathering together of people to engage with God and with each other. I believe youth work needs to take ecclesiology much more seriously. However, as Pete Ward comments, a church life fashioned to suit the cultural characteristics of a particular generational group has problems keeping in touch with the next generation. (Cray, Dawn, Mercer, Seward, Ward, Wright 1997) This is exactly the issue facing Christian youth work today. However many youth workers are employed we will not gain significant ground until we recognise the ecclesiastical dilemma of our work. Something has to change.

One option is to not take ecclesiology very seriously, to adopt a *missio Dei* approach and simply work, with God, in the world of young people. I believe this to be badly mistaken. It removes from the youth worker the resources of a Christian community living out the reality of Jesus in their midst, the power that engaging with such a community is for young people. I have much sympathy with Clapp when he describes the attraction of such a community in such an individualistic and materialistic culture. As we have seen Jesus and Paul had strong ecclesiastical theologies. Some relationship with the existing institutional structure is essential. Like several authors I also believe we must find ourselves with a way of thinking about ecclesiology which moves beyond the institutional framework. I hope I have shown there are some other options, rooted in the historical tradition of the Christian church.

Tentatively, therefore I incline towards the following. Ecclesiology has many aspects; worship, teaching, exploration, questioning, ritual, meaning making, community. Not all of these have to be practiced in one, culturally homogenous environment. In this I cannot agree with Fung and Clapp. This is the advantage of a youth congregation in a wider context. As with the example of Donovan, young people need to be encouraged to develop their own ecclesiology with all of its mission potential to their peers. But they are also encouraged to be in community with a diverse and mixed group of people, learning the values of the kingdom. This can involve the social life, serving life, of the wider Christian community. Ghettos of culture or age seem extremely problematic in the long-term.

If, as Pete Ward argues, youth work of today is the shape of the church of tomorrow (Ward 1996), then we have an awesome responsibility to provide some new models. We need radically alternative communities that engage radically with the world, embracing all that God is doing within it. I can think of no better way to finish than Dave Tomlinson quoting Rudolph Bahro,

“When forms of the old culture are dying, the new culture is created by a few people who are not afraid to be insecure.” (Tomlinson 1995 p 145)

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