

4. Reaching the Unchurched

The movie *Sister Act* has an important message to impart as we begin to consider the question of whether Parish Communion inhibits church growth. It is not just about the form of service. A brief illustration from the movie is instructive:

Maggie Smith: “Boogie Woogie on the piano? What were you thinking?”

Whoopi Goldberg: “I was thinking more like Vegas; you know, get some butts in the seats.”

Maggie Smith: “And what next? Popcorn? Curtain calls? This is not a theatre or casino!”

Whoopi Goldberg: “Yeah, but that’s the problem see. People like going to theatres and they like going to casinos. But they don’t like coming to church. Why? Because it’s a drag. But we could change all that see. We could pack this joint.”

Maggie Smith: “Through blasphemy? You have corrupted the entire choir!”

The parish priest: Overhears the conversation; and as Maggie Smith is telling Whoopi she cannot lead the choir anymore, enters the room and says:

“Reverend Mother, I just want to congratulate you. I haven’t enjoyed mass this much in years, What a marvellous program – innovative, inspiring – you are to be commended. I can’t wait until next Sunday when the choir performs again. Did you see the people walk right in from the street? That music, that heavenly music! Reverend Mother, it called to them.”

Maggie Smith: “It ... it did?”¹

Following the old, traditional form the church in Sister Act attracted few people to Sunday service. When Whoopi changed the music to something with which the people in the community were familiar, they came in to listen; and stayed to become members of the congregation. In doing so, Whoopi was practicing what is variously called contextual, or cultural theology.

Contextual Theology

Kenneth Leech, a leading proponent of contextual theology, said “...the Christian gospel is social at its very heart. It is embodied in a community, and it is the life of this community which is the central concern of the New Testament.”² Theology is about the pilgrimage of a community.³

Leech comments that theology had been regarded as a universal pattern of thought unrelated to class, gender, race, or social and cultural position. That model is now recognized as failing to acknowledge its contextual character, limitations and privileged status.⁴ He proposes a different model – a disciplined, prayerful, listening Christian community that tries to understand and respond to immediate problems in its own context. Such a theology has the advantages of being rooted in the worship and corporate life of actual community.⁵

Leech’s own experience leads him to conclude that contextual theology is done best in groups of people working together, supporting, criticising, and challenging each other in a framework of common discipleship and struggle. It is vital to understand the immediate local as well as the wider context in which one is working. We need to reflect on

¹ Hunter, 80.

² Leech, *The Sky is Red*, 33.

³ *Ibid*, 44.

⁴ *Ibid*, 127.

⁵ Leech, *Subversive Orthodoxy*, 29.

the content of our experience – feelings and hopes as well as thoughts. We need to let scripture and tradition challenge the present. We need to scrutinize the tradition in light of past and current experience. And, we need to recognize that all is in movement – nothing is fixed and final.⁶

In determining the kind of spirituality needed for the 21st century, Leech asks whether its main purpose is to provide comfort, reassurance and inspiration; or to challenge, confront and transform our lives.⁷ For Leech, the focus of a liberating theology must be on the creation of redeemed communities: baptismal communities, stressing continuing conflict with structures of oppression and injustice, and continuing call to a conversion, metanoia, and the continuing availability of God’s grace; eucharistic communities, emphasizing the commonness of spirituality, rooted in physical crudity of incarnation, resurrection and Eucharist, and mystery and wonder of God’s kingdom; communities of Biblical people, remembering the justice and mercy of the Hebrew prophets and Christ’s saving history in his death and resurrection; Inclusive communities, who ensure nobody is left out; and Communities of expectation, of vision, and that keep alive the flames of renewal.⁸

A Case For the Culturally Relevant Congregation

What Leech calls, contextualization, George Hunter terms ‘cultural relevance’. To him, indigenous Christianity engages the populations you want to reach. That means using language they understand, and adapting to their cultural style in all the ways you can.” He notes that the leaders of apostolic congregations all have a similar perspective – take the local culture seriously, and adapt to target that culture.⁹ Traditional churches, assume a cultural integrity that requires them to perpetuate the cultural forms God blessed in the past rather than adapting. Apostolic churches,

⁶ Leech, *Through Our Long Exile*, 129.

⁷ Leech, *Subversive Orthodoxy*, 41.

⁸ *Ibid*, 41-43.

⁹ Hunter, 55.

on the other hand, empathize with the experience of unchurched pre-Christians.¹⁰ In so doing they dramatizing a truth missionaries have known for decades – to reach non-Christian populations, the church needs to become culturally indigenous to its mission field.

When the church's communication forms are alien to the host population they may never perceive the Christian God as being for people like them.¹¹ In such circumstances it would matter little whether the service offering was parish communion or morning prayer. Neither would be perceived as relevant. To some extent, perhaps to a considerable extent, this is a problem that is confronted by the Anglican Church of Canada today. In the midst of our pluralistic, post-modern society we may be speaking a language that is no longer being understood.

Barriers to faith

Donald McGavran observed that the barriers keeping most people from faith and discipleship are more cultural and sociological than theological or religious.¹² People resist becoming Christians because they don't want to become like "church people". They are put off by our dated, alien church subculture; our alien language and pious jargon; our antiquated or foreign tastes in music, art, architecture; and our love of traditions more than the surrounding community.¹³ They suspect the church's agenda is to change people culturally – to transform them into clones of ourselves before they can qualify for membership.¹⁴

The importance of contextualization was understood by the prophetic church leaders of the past; notably Luther and the Wesleys. Luther scrapped the Latin Bible and Mass; and developed both in German, the language of the people. He also developed German hymnody

¹⁰ Hunter, 56.

¹¹ Ibid, 58.

¹² Ibid, 61.

¹³ Ibid, 59.

¹⁴ Ibid, 60.

using contemporary folk music and even beer hall music that German people knew and loved. The Methodists coached pastors and evangelists to speak in obvious, common, easy words and not deviate from the usual way of speaking of the average person. They also wrote Christian poetry to be sung to tunes people knew.¹⁵ Wesley's field preaching and class meetings met people where they were; not where Wesley, a cultured man, was. In fact, both Wesleys sacrificed personal preferences and aesthetic tastes for their "sanctified pragmatism." Charles was a poet and musician with high church tastes, but wrote hymns in the music genre being sung in England's public houses. John, after 33 years of open-air field preaching to the unchurched, confessed that field preaching was a cross; but he could see no other way of preaching the gospel to every creature.¹⁶

Hunter says that unchurched people today do not resonate with Bach, Handel, Luther, Wesley or Salvation Army Band music.¹⁷ Moreover, he says, "...our teenagers and young adults are no more likely to adapt to churches perpetuating the 1950's than they are likely to buy their father's Oldsmobile."¹⁸ In addition, our church culture has erected dozens of barriers that separate many people from becoming disciples:

- The unemployed and welfare recipients are always 'them'
- The poor are regarded as unworthy
- There is a subtle theological prejudice against poverty
- The surroundings, and furnishings say those without means are in the wrong place
- The offering plate is a formidable barrier - compulsion to donate
- Those who have broken the moral code feel barriers
 - single mothers

¹⁵ Hunter, ...Unchurched, 66.

¹⁶ George Hunter, John Wesley As Church Growth Strategist, found at Wesley Centre Online, Northwest Nazarene University, <http://wesley.nnu.edu/>.

¹⁷ Hunter, ...Unchurched, 67.

¹⁸ Ibid, 63.

- smokers, drinkers
- homosexuals
- sex trade workers
- common law partners
- the vulgar, users of foul language, those lacking etiquette¹⁹

The jarring thing is that these were the very people that were the company of the Carpenter - outsiders: illiterates, fishers, tax collectors, lepers and prostitutes - those shunned by the 'righteous' people of his world.²⁰ As Christopher Levan notes, "There is little doubt that the very lack of boundaries captured the imagination of Christ's first followers."²¹ He brought liberation to all the lost minorities - slaves, the uneducated, women... But as the Jesus movement grew, it took on the colouring of the patriarchal organizations among whom it found itself - empires, teacher-disciple schools of philosophy, and mystery religions with closely guarded entrance examinations." It began to have boundaries.

What we do not realize is that we are also vulnerable within our membership. Lyle Schaller has said, "There is considerable evidence which suggests that at least one-third, and perhaps as many as one-half of all protestant church members do not feel a sense of belonging to the congregation of which they are members. They have been received into membership, but have never felt they have been accepted into the fellowship circle."²² Many of the people who leave the church disenchant leave because no one asked them to become involved. Others may have been rebuffed when they tried to offer their services.

¹⁹ Christopher Levan, God Hates Religion: How the Gospels Condemn False Religious Practice, Etobicoke: The United Church Publishing House, 1995), 90-93.

²⁰ Ibid, 93.

²¹ Ibid, 94.

²² Gary McIntosh & Glen Martin, Finding Them, Keeping Them: Effective Strategies for Evangelism and Assimilation in the Local Church, (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992), 77.

How ready we are to accept people with dirt under their fingernails, or unshined shoes, with bad breath or body odour, who might belch or break wind or split an infinitive in the church building, or who may be “politically incorrect” in terms of the ideology of the moment, may be every bit as important in attracting and retaining church members as the form of service we offer.