

A Summary of Mission-shaped Church

Some time in early 2005, the Australian church suddenly became interested in ‘fresh expressions of church’ and the ‘emerging church’. Whilst good work, at both the theoretical and practical level, has been going on long before this, it is only in the last year or so that the issue has ‘emerged’ onto the agenda of the church at large. A testimony to this wider interest is the recent speaking tour of Australia by Brian McLaren (guru of the emergent church movement in the USA), as well as the multiple conferences on mission-shaped church held nationally last year, and planned again for later this year (June 2006).

The topic has also piqued the interest of the bishops of the Anglican Church in Australia. During 2005, the bishops received a presentation from Bishop Graham Cray. Cray was the chairman of the Church of England working party that produced the 2004 report *Mission-shaped Church: Church Planting and Fresh Expressions of Church in a Changing Context* (hereafter *MSC*). In response, the Australian bishops agreed to setup a taskforce to explore the implications of fresh expressions of church in an Australian context. In parallel with the work of the taskforce, the Doctrine Commission has been asked to consider the theological implications raised by *MSC*. The essays which follow have been prepared by members of the commission in response to its discussions on the report. In order to orient the reader to the issues raised by those essays, I offer this short summary of *MSC*.

MSC is both a refinement and reformulation of a strategy articulated a decade earlier in the document *Breaking New Ground: Church Planting in the Church of England*. This 1994 report argued that church planting was a legitimate part of the mission of the church, and saw church planting as ‘a supplementary strategy that enhances the essential thrust of the parish principle’.ⁱ *MSC* continues to affirm the importance of church planting, but also acknowledges that things have moved on significantly in ten years. *MSC* extends the conclusion of its predecessor report in two important ways, which are both reflected in the subtitle of the 2004 work. Firstly, the focus has been broadened to include both ‘*Church Planting and Fresh Expressions of Church*’. Whereas the predecessor report had assumed a certain definition of what a church plant ought to look like, *MSC* recognises a much greater range of ‘fresh expressions’ of church. Secondly, *MSC* acknowledges that the church exists in a ‘*Changing Context*’, and that the societal shifts which have already occurred mean that a

ⁱ *Breaking New Ground*, Church House Publishing, 1994, page v.

strategy relying solely on a parish-based mission is inadequate. What has been a 'supplementary strategy' in 1994 has now become a necessary step.

The nature of community has so changed (and was changing long before 1994) that no one strategy will be adequate to fulfil the Anglican incarnational principle in Britain today. Communities are now multi-layered, comprising neighbourhoods, usually with permeable boundaries, and a wide variety of networks, ranging from the relatively local to the global ... It is clear to us that the parochial system remains an essential and central part of the national Church's strategy to deliver incarnational mission. But the existing parochial system alone is no longer able fully to deliver its underlying mission purpose. We need to recognize that a variety of integrated missionary approaches is required. A mixed economy of parish churches and network churches will be necessary, in an active partnership across a wider area, perhaps a deanery. (*MSC*: page xi)

In the opening chapter of the report, *MSC* gives a thumb-nail sketch of some of the significant societal shifts in late-modern / postmodern / post-Christendom Britain, which have meant that the traditional Anglican pattern of Sunday services in geographically-defined parishes has become increasingly out-of-touch with the majority of the population. Significantly, the report argues that 'networks' rather than 'neighbourhoods' are increasingly the context for most social relationships.

The Western world, at the start of the third millennium, is best described as a 'network society'. This is a fundamental change: 'the emergence of a new social structure'. In a network society the importance of place is secondary to the importance of 'flows' ... Networks have not replaced neighbourhoods, but they change them. Community and a sense of community are often disconnected from locality and geography. A typical town will have an array of networks... It is not that locality, place and territory have no significance. It is simply that they are now just one layer of the complex shape of society. (*MSC*: 4, 5, 6)

One outworking of this societal shift is that various new forms of church have arisen in response to the shift towards network-based relationships.

many of the fresh expressions of church are connecting with people through the networks in which they live, rather than through the place where they live. (*MSC*: 7)

MSC argues that, if the church is to truly engage with its society, the centuries-old parish-based 'you come to us' approach is insufficient, and that 'fresh expressions' of church, with

their ‘we’ll come to you’ approach are both theologically appropriate and strategically significant.

Anglicans aim to follow the pattern of the incarnation – to be with people where they are, how they are. The word ‘where’ in that sentence suggests geography and territory – being in a particular place and location. In Britain today, it might help to say that we must be with people how they are. ‘How’ is a word that suggests connection beyond geography and locality – connecting with people’s culture, values, lifestyle and networks, as well as with their location. A geographical approach alone is not sufficient. Parish, by itself, is no longer adequate as the Church of England’s missionary strategy. (*MSC*: 12)

MSC is arguing for a radicalisation of the church’s mission strategy that goes beyond the strategy of ‘church planting’ as articulated by the earlier report. This new strategy is not offered on the basis of an untested theory, but on the basis of the kinds of new churches which have in practice been emerging in Britain over the past decade. *MSC* argues that there has been a paradigm shift since 1994 in both the understanding of church and the expressions of it. Whereas the 1994 report could confidently say ‘church planting normally involves the establishing of a new congregation or worship centre’,ⁱⁱ thinking has ‘moved on’ since then, so much so that ‘[v]irtually every concept in that sentence is now challenged by the variety that has emerged’ (*MSC*: 22). In addition, the particular issues that dominated the agenda in 1994 (especially cross-boundary church plants) have become less significant with the rise of ‘non-boundary’ network churches. The extent to which the thinking has ‘moving on’ in a decade is well captured in the conclusion to chapter two:

Breaking New Ground exemplified its time and context. It encouraged containment, safety and gradual development within the existing legal framework, and it helped legitimize church planting. But the ‘how to’ question that was fundamental to *Breaking New Ground* is being rapidly overtaken by a more radical question – ‘why to’. There are now fewer books on church planting practice, and many more reflect radically on what church is and think creatively about it. In response to the changes of the world and the crisis of the Church there is an increasing interest in exploring ‘what is church, and what is church for?’ (*MSC*: 27)

In light of this, *MSC* offers a more encompassing definition of ‘church planting’.

ⁱⁱ *Breaking New Ground* para 8.2

Church planting is the process by which a seed of the life and message of Jesus embodied by a community of Christians is immersed for mission reasons in a particular cultural or geographic context. The intended consequence is that it roots there, coming to life as a new indigenous body of Christian disciples well suited to continue in mission. (*MSC*: 32)

Planting is a process, but unless and until the kingdom and the mission are in the DNA of the seed of the church, what is planted will prove to be sterile. If mission is not located within the identity of church, planting is very unlikely to recover it. (*MSC*: 33)

If church-planting is a process, then how should we describe that which results from the planting process? The nominal phrase ‘church-plant’ is both cumbersome and potentially confusing. *MSC* considers various other options (e.g. ‘new forms of church’, ‘new ways of being church’, ‘Emerging Church’) before deciding for the phrase ‘fresh expressions’.

The phrase **fresh expressions of church** is used in this report. The Preface to the Declaration of Assent, which Church of England ministers make at their licensing, states ‘The Church of England . . . professes the faith uniquely revealed in the Holy Scriptures and set forth in the catholic creeds, which faith the Church is called upon to proclaim afresh in each generation.’ The term ‘fresh expressions’ echoes these words. It suggests something new or enlivened is happening, but also suggests connection to history and the developing story of God’s work in the Church. The phrase also embraces two realities: existing churches that are seeking to renew or redirect what they already have, and others who are intentionally sending out planting groups to discover what will emerge when the gospel is immersed in the mission context. The weakness of the phrase ‘fresh expressions’ is that it does not easily differentiate between the two realities mentioned above – those who are discovering new life within (which overflows in mission), and those who deliberately go out to immerse church and gospel elsewhere. For this reason this report speaks about both ‘planting’ and ‘expressions’, and commends this vocabulary. (*MSC*: 34)

MSC argues that the church as a whole should be allowing and encouraging ‘fresh expressions of church’, because these provide a vital missional opportunity to reach those who cannot be reached by traditional forms of mission. In the English context, of the 94% of the population who are not adherents of other faiths, only 10% are regular attenders at church, and another 10% are ‘fringe’ attenders. 40% are ‘de-churched’. That is, at some point in their life they attended church, but no longer presently do so. Of these, 20% are the ‘open de-churched’ – people who have left church at some point, but are open to return if suitably

contacted and invited, and the remaining 20% are the ‘closed de-church’, who have no intention of returning because they have been damaged or disillusioned by the church. Finally, the remaining 40% have never been to church, except perhaps for the funeral or wedding of a friend or relative. From this, the report concludes

The missionary situation faced by the Church has changed. Inviting people back to church as we currently know it may be an effective mission strategy for reaching up to (perhaps) one third of the population who are dechurched. But it is misconceived to assume that this represents a coherent mission approach for the majority of the population for whom church as we know it is peripheral, obscure, confusing or irrelevant.

In this context both fresh expressions of church and church planting offer ways forward. The change is to an outward focus: from a ‘come to us’ approach to a ‘we will go to you’ attitude, embodying the gospel where people are, rather than embodying it where we are, and in ways we prefer. Church planting is a helpful reminder that an essential aspect of ‘church’ is its missionary nature – a fresh movement of the Spirit, in prayer, outgoing love and evangelism in obedience to our Lord’s command. Best church planting and most fresh expressions of church reassert the identity of the Church as mission, and both are helping us to rediscover our apostolic identity. If the Church is not missionary, it has denied itself and its calling, for it has departed from the very nature of God. (MSC: 41)

Though the statistics will differ for the Australian context, there is no doubt that the Australian church is faced with the same underlying dilemma, of how to reach the majority of our society who are beyond the reach of our traditional mission strategies. Fresh expressions of church offer the church an answer to this dilemma.

A significant part of the *MSC* report describes and analyses a broad variety of the ‘fresh expressions of church’ which have emerged in response to the changing missionary context.ⁱⁱⁱ

Alternative worship communities are typically made up from people who have departed from existing churches, seeing themselves as post-denominational and postmodern. Their aim is to connect Church – and especially worship – with particular shifting segments of popular culture.

ⁱⁱⁱ The descriptions of these various “fresh expressions” are my abridgement from chapter 4 of *MSC*, and in some cases, from sources quoted by *MSC*. The reader is encouraged to consult the relevant section in *MSC* for further references.

Base Ecclesial Communities (BECs) are strongly identified with people at the bottom or edges of society, and offer a gospel of liberation: a church of the poor, for the poor. BECs work so that people are empowered. They seek to bring hope and challenge - hope to the oppressed, and challenge that together people can work for a better society.

Café church seeks to engage with café culture. The noticeable characteristic of café church is a deliberate change of ambience and 'feel' when people meet corporately. Gatherings are around small tables rather than in pews. People characteristically sit and talk. Interaction rather than spectating is encouraged.

Cell church is based on the conviction that the small group is truly church. Cell church represents a 'two-winged' approach to church that seeks to emphasize both large ("Celebration") and small ("cell") group expressions of Christian community, in which every cell member has the potential to be involved in ministry.

Churches arising out of community initiatives . Some churches have begun as a result of community initiatives. In most instances these initiatives have not been an attempt to create church – church has developed through or out of the initiative. Churches of this sort are typically found in areas of social deprivation, and among people that have experienced significant dislocation from existing forms of church.

Multiple and midweek congregations : The strategy of working with multiple congregations has a long history. Holding 8.00 a.m. BCP Communion in addition to other Sunday services is probably the best-known example. The monthly Family Service may be another. The intention is to offer different liturgical and communal styles so that different cultural or sociological groups are nourished and sustained within the same building.

Network-focused churches: Networks are a major social reality. Increasingly, many people's lives are best described by the networks to which they relate, rather than simply by the place where they live. 'Network church' encourages a 'go and inhabit' approach: gospel and church becoming a reality among the variety of ways people are

living. They involve not so much cross-boundary as non-boundary church planting, because many people are no longer defining themselves by geographical boundaries.

School-based and school-linked congregations and churches: Some Church schools have begun after-school groups that become church. They draw primary school children, parents of both sexes and grandparents. The more accessible style may suit some newer Christians.

Seeker church: The Seeker approach was founded by Willow Creek Church in Chicago. It attempts to create an experience of worship and teaching in which ‘seekers’ will feel comfortable. This involves scrutinizing the content of services, so they are accessible and meaningful to people with little background in Christian worship, and make no assumption about the faith commitment of those attending.

Traditional church plants are typically located within the parish of the sending congregation and retain close links to the sending congregation, but are seen as a separate congregation, not just an additional service. The planting team who plant the new church might be 20 or more people plus children who are ‘send out’ from the ‘sending’ church to establish a work in a new area/social group.

Traditional forms of church inspiring new interest: There is some evidence of an increase in attendance at cathedral and other churches offering traditional styles of worship.

Youth congregations. Youth congregations often have a weekly pattern, have recognized leaders, pastoral structures and clear mission intentions. The growing trend for youth worship and the development of youth congregations both demonstrate the difficulty of integrating young people in to the Church of England as we know it.

As can be seen from the variety of this list, and from the broad definition of church-planting above, MSC is arguing for a definition of ‘church’ which is much wider than the ‘typical’ Anglican parish church.

The argument which MSC gives for the recognition of fresh expressions of church is not just pragmatic (i.e. the church will die out if it doesn’t) but also theological. *MSC* seeks to

provide a ‘theological framework for the Church of England in mission’ by grounding a missionary ecclesiology in five theological principles.

1	<p>God – Father, Son & Spirit - is a missionary God.</p> <p>The church is the both the fruit of God’s mission and the agent of his mission. ‘It is therefore of the essence (the DNA) of the Church to be a missionary community’ (<i>MSC</i>: 85).</p> <p>‘Mission comes from the Father, through the Son in the power of the Spirit. The Son himself, through incarnation, atonement, resurrection and ascension, is the sole foundation of the Church. We are stewards of a gospel that tells what he has done ... It is the work of the Spirit to empower the Church to preach and embody that gospel in ways appropriate to each cultural context’ (<i>MSC</i>: 85-6).</p>
2	<p>Incarnation</p> <p>‘A truly incarnational Church is one that imitates, through the Spirit, both Christ’s loving identification with his culture and his costly counter-cultural stance within it. His announcement of, and promise of, God’s kingdom cannot be separated from his call to repentance, as the price of entry. Following his example, his Church is called to loving identification with those to whom it is sent, and to exemplify the way of life to which those who repent turn. Otherwise its call to repentance is reduced to detached moralizing (<i>MSC</i>: 87-8).</p>
3	<p>The Holy Spirit provides the first-fruits of the kingdom</p> <p>‘the Spirit makes known to us the foretaste and first fruits of the coming kingdom. The Spirit brings into being, in and through the Church, anticipations of things that Scripture promises for the Last Day’ (<i>MSC</i>: 89).</p> <p><i>MSC</i> argues that the church takes its missionary form through receiving the gifts of the past (i.e. scripture) and the gifts of the future (the Spirit), and concludes: “At a time of substantial change, the Church of England needs to learn from the Spirit to be more an anticipation of God’s future than a society for the preservation of the past. Perhaps our greatest need is of a baptism of imagination about the forms of the Church’ (<i>MSC</i>: 90).</p>
4	<p>Inculturation / Contextualization</p> <p>No society is culture-neutral. In order for a church to embody the gospel in a way appropriate to the local context, ‘Contextualization’ must occur. This necessitates a three-way conversation – the historic gospel (uniquely revealed in Holy Scripture and embodied in the Catholic creeds), the church (with its own particular culture), and the culture within which the gospel is being shared. All three are needed if a church is to engage in mission within their own cultures. However, in the attempt to be ‘relevant’, the church must be aware</p>

	of the dangers of syncretism (see <i>MSC</i> : 90-91).
5	<p>The Church is designed to reproduce</p> <p>‘the Church is God’s community with a divine mandate to reproduce. It is intended by God to multiply, by the Spirit, and to fill all creation. This is an essential dimension of any missionary ecclesiology. Churches are created by God to grow’ (<i>MSC</i>: 93).</p>

MSC argues that a missionary ecclesiology based on these five principles is consistent with classic marks of the church – ‘one, holy, catholic, and apostolic’ – as enshrined in Nicene Creed, and is likewise also consistent with Anglicanism. However, it also recognises that any fresh expressions of church which are to be a part of the Church of England will also have to have three additional distinctive marks. There must be a commitment by the leadership to the historic Christian faith (in the form of the *declaration of assent*), that the sacraments of baptism and the Eucharist must be practiced by the church, and the church must be Episcopally authorised and led (see *MSC*: 100-101). The report concludes with recommendations on how to implement a mission-shaped church strategy in the specific context of the English church.

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