

This is the last in the short series of articles in which Community Companion, Peter McDowell, offers some personal reflections on 'Living the Questions'.

How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?



New Paradigm Ahead
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Crisis of Church

A friend of mine was asked if he was having a crisis of faith. He replied:

"No, I'm having a crisis of church."

He seems to sum up what I am hearing from many people

who have faith and want to take it seriously, or who are seriously exploring faith. Many are telling me that the church does not help them on their spiritual journey. In fact church has often been a hindrance.

And, I must say, this resonates with my own experience over the past ten years or so. It was initially hard to be honest and to admit that church no longer 'fit', it no longer felt right – especially since I was the minister!

Obviously I did not always feel this way. I had been comfortable in church and my faith was nurtured within it. So what is going on that I and many others are now finding church a problem? I think that a large part of it has to do with culture.

Faith and culture

When I went to live and work in Nepal, I loved being part of the Nepali church. It was very different from church as I was used to it in Northern Ireland. There were obvious differences such as the music style, being seated on the ground etc. But there were also underlying cultural differences in the way people thought about and understood the world. This affected how they understood their faith. I was glad the Nepali church was different. It was right for Nepal. Yet I was always a bit of an outsider.

When we lived in Kathmandu, I also enjoyed going to the International Congregation. There I was able to worship in English and in a cultural format in which I felt at home.

Faith has to be expressed in culturally appropriate forms. Nepalis required a church that allowed for an expression of faith for their culture. I loved being part of it, but I always felt somewhat alien, so enjoyed a chance to worship in a more Western setting as well.

How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land? was the cry of a people exiled from their home in Jerusalem (Psalm 137:1-4). It was a very real question about how to express faith in a new cultural context where the old Temple-centred worship was no longer an option.

It seems that the gospel is always in a paradoxical relationship with culture. The life of faith must be expressed in the idiom of the culture which the people of faith inhabit. The church must grow out of an engagement between the gospel and the culture in which it exists.

Hence the almost instinctive approach in any new cultural context has been to translate the Bible into the local language.

But, while there must be a sense of 'fit' between the life of faith and the surrounding culture, the gospel also calls all cultures into question. It challenges and questions the assumptions and practices of every culture it encounters, including the culture out of which it arose.

A new paradigm



We are in a situation where the culture has been changing around the church in the West for several years. The church has been well adapted to, and comfortable in, the old culture. In fact, on his retirement back to England after a career working mostly in India, Lesslie Newbigin's observation was that the church in the UK had become **too** comfortable and adjusted to its culture, so that the challenging aspect of the gospel simply wasn't heard any more.¹

Now, the culture has shifted around us and the church is struggling to cope. Many of us are asking "How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?"

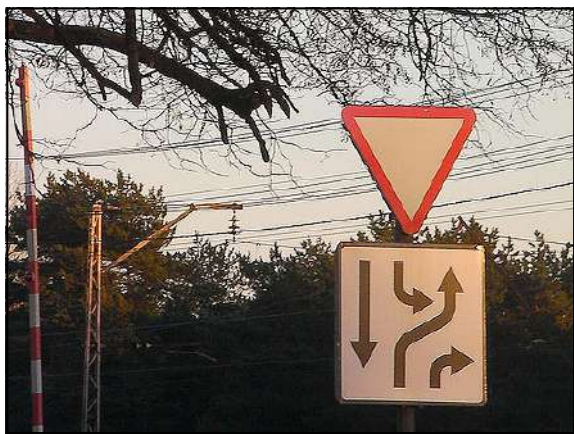
My research on documents within my own church, the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, showed that the changes in culture and society were consistently seen as negative. And in the documents it was assumed that the changes were all external to the church. I suspect that most mainline churches have this attitude.

This, I think, explains why I and others have felt a growing disconnect and frustration. The changes in society and culture are not only outside the church; they are also within the church. They are within me. I consider myself part of the new emerging culture. I like many of the changes in our society and culture, although there are some features I don't like so much. But I would not want to go back, even if we could.

However, for many people within the churches, and for the churches as institutions, the new cultural landscape feels alien and uncomfortable. The forms and expressions of church still 'fit' and the thought of anything new is disorientating.

The conclusion I came to in my research was that the church remains captive to a culture that no longer exists, but is estranged from the culture it now inhabits.

Where do we go from here?



Which Way? by Tony Bowden CC BY 2.0

The real problem for those of us who feel at home in the emerging culture and are looking for an appropriate form of church is that no one yet fully knows what a life of faith, or a church, emerging from an encounter between the gospel and the new emerging culture is going to look like.

If Hans Küng's theory is correct we should expect a 'paradigm shift', in which a new shape of church will emerge.² It will be something that could not have been



predicted beforehand, but which looking back will show clear continuity with what has gone before. Examples from history include the emergence

of the synagogue as a form of worship when the Jewish people were exiled to Babylon, and the emergence of Protestant churches after the Reformation.

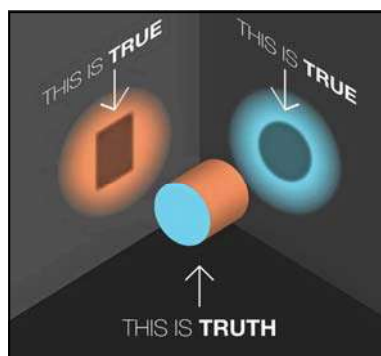
Küng, importantly notes that after such paradigm shifts in church history the old paradigm continues to exist, although it is itself changed in the whole process. So, I am not here predicting, or advocating, the demise of the existing churches. But I do believe that the process of formation of a new paradigm of church will actually help existing churches come to terms with the world they now inhabit.

Shane Claiborne talks about the time that he and his friends came to the point where they

decided to stop complaining about the church we saw, and we set our hearts on becoming the church we dreamed of.³

So, what might a church appropriate for this emerging culture look like? What will the church I am dreaming of look like? Here are some of the things I am looking for. They may or may not resonate with how you feel, and I would love to hear your comments.

I want a church:



This is Truth by Leigh Blackall

- that recognises that 'truth' is a complex subject. Truth is not simply about facts, but is centred on a Person, which is a different way of 'knowing';

- that, therefore, puts more emphasis on helping me explore truth and

grow in truth, rather than telling me what I should believe;

- that refuses to take responsibility for my relationship with God and my walk of faith but is a community of faith in which I find accountability and support;
- that has worship in which I am an active participant not an observer of what is happening at the front;
- that has a leadership structure, and an organisational structure, which is participatory and enabling, not authoritarian;
- that, in searching for disciplines and forms of faith appropriate for the emerging culture, draws from Christian traditions throughout the ages in a way that is 'playful as well as serious and eclectic as well as respectful'.⁴

Or, as William Stringfellow put it, a church that is,

Dynamic and erratic, spontaneous and radical, audacious and immature, committed if not altogether coherent. Ecumenically open and often experimental; visible here and there, now and then but unsettled institutionally. Almost monastic in nature, but most of all enacting a fearful hope for society.

Peter McDowell



1 Lesslie Newbigin, 'Gospel and Culture', 1995, p 7.

2 Hans Küng, *Theology for the Third Millennium: An Ecumenical View* (London: Harper Collins, 1991), 123–169.

3 S. Claiborne, *The Irresistible Revolution: Living as an Ordinary Radical* (Zondervan, 2008), p 64.

4 J. Baker, D. Gay, and J. Brown, *Alternative Worship: Resources from and for the Emerging Church* (Baker Books, 2004), p xi.