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Encounters on the Edge



no. 30:
**Discernment
in Mission:**
Navigation Aids for
Mission-shaped
Processes

Contents

Where are we dear?	3	The nature of	
Discernment not directive.....	4	the journey	21
Aids to navigation	4	Beware the waters of	
		shallow thinking.....	21
Start with the end		The voyage changes the sailor.....	21
in mind	5	Concentration and spread	24
Where are you called to sail?.....	6	The journey works in loops.....	26
Non-churched and		Distances and courses.....	27
de-churched adult attitudes	7	What matters	29
Where do you start from?	9		
Re-examining worship,			
community and mission	13		
The voyages set			
by the Spirit	16		
Oh dear	16		
The Judean journey is			
not enough.....	17		
The Samaria safari	18		
The ends of the earth			
expedition	19		
Own up	20		

Discernment in Mission: Navigation Aids for Mission-shaped Processes

Where are we dear?

Freddy and Felicity were all at sea. They weren't sure where they were anymore. They had sailed through an extended patch of mist and when they had emerged, the bits of coastline they saw near them weren't familiar. Confusingly, the islands around them all looked much the same. The sailing yacht they had chartered didn't have GPS so there were not going to be instant, accurate answers. There were some charts and a compass. However, someone had told them that unless you knew roughly where you were already, it was desperately easy to deceive yourself as to your exact position. The way to a safe port sounded just the ticket, but how to find it was not obvious. Worryingly, there might be hidden rocks that they would only find the very hard way. A crash course in visual coastal navigation sounded like both a good idea and a bad pun.



On a boat

Their road map reading skills just didn't help that much in coastal waters. For a start there are no signposts. The sea has tides and currents so any course you steer and where you end up aren't the same. Unless you anchor, you are always moving; there is no lay-by to pull into. Sailors who navigate without GPS will also know about the triangle of uncertainty that teaches them modesty about claiming to know exactly where they are.

My sense is that **those starting out in leading fresh expressions of church have not been trained for this mission task that is like being at sea.** Instead, they have been trained for map reading on land; the delights of liturgy, the dynamics of pastoral care, the machinery of church government, the utility of administration and the privileges of priesthood are frankly a fat lot of use. None of them are starting points although they may be useful

when you know where you are and how to sail to your destination. They are valuable for life on the boat, but they are not its major navigating aids. As starting fresh expressions has become popularised, a number of people, in my view, are in danger of sailing off into waters that could be either rewarding or rather dangerous, without the kinds of skills that they need in discerning where God is calling them. Moreover, modesty will remind us that what we call the Fall teaches that everything we think, do and say is flawed and partial. At best we only know in part (1Cor 13.9).

Discernment not directive

Since 1997, I have enjoyed the enormous privilege to spend time with many pioneers, listening and learning from them. I have, so to speak, watched how they navigate, noticed what seems to help, attended to where they actually sail and sadly occasionally seen a few end up on the rocks. My observation of them has shaped how I think today. I salute my teachers with gratitude.

They too have found things out by trial and error. I don't want to say they have discovered what "works" because that would be too much like the map reading analogy "*Turn left at the next roundabout, go up the hill, take the A123 for three miles and you will arrive at ...*" etc. With fresh expressions of church, it just isn't like that. You are at sea. You are moving in waters that are barely charted and it needs creativity, courage and care. Pioneers know that they are called to bring to birth, and see to maturity, communities of people who together are following Christ. That's the task. How you start the voyage and how you navigate towards there is much less obvious. It is certainly not a case of setting one specific course and shouting "*full ahead*" to the engine room.

Aids to navigation

In this issue are frameworks for discernment. The *Encounters on the Edge* stories illustrate some of them. I have used most of these aids in teaching round the world and the diagrams seem to create frameworks by which people can identify their own position. Providentially, they also seem to spark creativity and people are liberated by them. I offer each of them as a navigation device. I hope by using them people will have a closer idea of where they are and how they could continue their own journey across the new-ish seas of cross-cultural mission in the west.

Start with the end in mind

It would be crazy to hire a boat in Dover to sail to Dublin. Choosing to start from somewhere between Bristol and Liverpool would be more obvious. But for people who live in Dover and like it, there is the attraction of starting from what you know and it would be quicker to get on board. The down side is you start at a disadvantage for good access to Ireland. **However, what is clearly daft is to imagine one port is the best place from which to sail to everywhere.** It is the same with choosing a starting point in mission for who it is you think God calls you to reach.



A starting port

The analogy suggests that mission is more like a journey we make, than an invitation to others to come and join us. This itself is an important shift of mind out of our Christendom inheritance. It is especially salutary for Anglicans but not limited to them. Anglicanism has long defined itself by its worship and the claim that this worship is normative, hence the term *Common* Worship and the Book of *Common* Prayer. Mantras in ecclesiology¹ and our practice have reinforced each other. For many years, the focus of our own priorities (and therefore our mission) has been to invite people to come and see what worshippers do. "*Come to church*" has been the invitation to enter our public building and a worship event we put on. Even for Christians, the dubious theological phrase "*going to church*" has meant attending worship. Guest services, family services, school chapel, Christmas, Harvest, and Willow Creek are all variants on this assumption. Up until recently, church planters have been too captive to this history. Even their teaching sources marked the "birth" of a plant by its first public worship service. Virtually all the life

¹ "*The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy him for ever*" The Westminster Confession

cycle material takes this view.² It's not totally wrong; it's just not always right. **We have usually begun with a focus on worship** as the first defining mark of what it is to do church. The radical thought is that **it may be equally valid to begin elsewhere**. Dover isn't the only port.

Where are you called to sail?

Suppose we started the process by asking where is our destination? The first question becomes "To whom are you sent?"³ In the understanding made more accessible through *Mission-shaped Church*, we are learning to talk about four groups in society. (For the moment I am not including those of another world faith; the surveys think they are about another 6% of the population.)

Attendance:	fringe	open de-churched	non-churched	closed de-churched
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The de-churched are those with significant previous church experience. The non-churched have never been except for the funeral of a relative. *Mission-shaped Church* explains these terms in greater depth.⁴ At the moment there are some things we don't know about these groups, and some things we do know.

What the accurate proportions of the groups are is uncertain. The figures in *Mission-shaped Church* were rounded up from the published part of the work by Richter and Francis from a London based telesurvey in 1996⁵. Since then, other surveys have been done by them, ORB and Tearfund. I am grateful to Tearfund for pointing out that the non-churched also fall into open

² Much of it stems from the work of Bill Tinsley of Fuller Theological Seminary and then Bruce Patrick in New Zealand who produced a booklet *The Life Cycle of Reproducing Churches* New Zealand Baptist Union 1992

³ This is the process commended and teased out in chapter 6 of *Mission-shaped Church* but which, in my experience, has often been ignored in talking about the report since.

⁴ *Mission-shaped Church* Church House Publishing 2004 chapter 3 p.36

⁵ Leslie J. Francis and Philip Richter *Gone But Not Forgotten* Darton, Longman and Todd 1998

and closed categories⁶. The proportions found vary quite considerably⁷ and perhaps what they show most of all is that the way the question about attendance is framed affects the responses given. I am hopeful of future clarity because the interested parties have got together, agreed a better way to put things and set in motion further research.

What we do know is that these groups have different convictions. Intellectually and culturally, people are in different places. They are like different ports to sail to. The best source for this that I know is from Professor Robin Gill and his book *Church Going and Christian Ethics* (CUP 1999). I have extracted one table by way of illustration.

Non-churched and de-churched adult attitudes

	child weekly at church	non-churched as child
I know God really exists & have no doubts or have doubts and still believe	40%	19%
I don't believe in God nor that there is a way to find out	27%	54%
I don't believe in God and never have	6%	40%
The bible is the actual word of God or inspired word of God	32%	13%
I never pray	41%	70%
I pray at least every fortnight	13%	6%

Robin Gill *Church Going and Christian Ethics* p.132

⁶ At present all we know is that the 3% identified by Tearfund as open non-churched shows some correlation with the 8% of people attending Alpha without a church background according to Steve Hunt *The Alpha Enterprise* Ashgate Publishing 2004 pp.167-171 table 10.8

⁷ The data is complex because the sources don't all measure the same thing so detailed comparison is of limited value. It is factual to say the lowest figure given on the open de-churched is 11% and the highest 42%. It may be fair to say no one thinks the non-churched are less than 30%.

The questions put and the percentage of agreement make it very plausible to have the slide title that I chose. Notice what a difference early exposure to the Christian faith makes in convictions. Normally Christian leaders then respond, “We must get more children into Sunday school.” I agree, but I am also interested in those who are adults now. For me, this is evidence that the analogy of sailing to different ports is a fair one to describe mission; people live at different mental addresses.

Another way to analyse this is not to take measures of attendance, but a looser category related to the cultural or historical period in which they live. It is another angle on looking at the differing attitudes we will meet as we journey in mission. So the matrix grows another layer.

Attendance:	fringe	open de-churched	non-churched	closed de-churched
Attitude:	Christendom	pre-Christian	post-Christian	anti-Christian

Note how the first two rows relate. Fringe and Christendom widely overlap. One reason some people are fringe is that Christendom encourages this associational loose sort of belonging. I recognise however that some fringe people can come from the next two columns in the matrix, usually through friendships with Christians. Non-churched and post-Christian are in the same column because they are, at least, loosely related. I agree some non-churched will be more like pre-Christian in that they really don't know the story at all and haven't friends who are known to be Christians. All closed de-churched could be called anti-Christian, though the latter may also come from non-churched.

Please note however that open de-churched and pre-Christian are quite different groups of people. The open de-churched used to attend and now no longer do, but are not alienated. By and large, by pre-Christians I mean the children and young people of post-Christian parents. I note many youth workers talk of openness among youth. Perhaps they don't have the baggage of rejection of Christian values or bad memories to work through.

The similarity between open de-churched and pre-Christians is only found in the broad approach we may make to them.

I now add the varying climates in these different groups as we meet them on our journey.

Attendance:	fringe	open de-churched	non-churched	closed de-churched
Attitude:	Christendom	pre-Christian	post-Christian	anti-Christian
Climate:	warm	cool	cold	arctic

I hasten to add that this is far more about their attitude to the church, rather than Christ or even God. If there are different ports to sail to, and indeed different weather to meet, it makes some sense to say there isn't one best starting place. It also further undermines the church's dubious default position which is to ask others to come to us, not go to them.

Where do you start from?

If our call is work among the existing fringe and people still in the Christendom mindset, it may work well to invite them to come to better, deeper, more welcoming **public worship**. For some older people, that might be a quality 1662 Communion service. For others it might be a good family service or for busy “baby-boomers”, it could be a *Taizé* evening. **It's not wrong; it's just not right for all.** Dover is great for sailing to Calais or Boulogne.

However, with people and communities more distanced from Christianity like the open de-churched or those who seem to be pre-Christian, it makes much more sense to start with relational forms of **evangelism** rather than events like worship. You might say “*different tribe therefore different approach*”, or in this analogy, “*different destination therefore different starting port*”.

Process-style evangelism has tried to start further away from worship and nearer to where people are. The home and the secular venue have been used, recognising that church buildings can be an alien environment. Making individual relationships rather than the draw of being with worshippers has been the starting point, which is more attractive and vulnerable. Presentation and discussion rather than worship have been the intellectual content. Notably in *Alpha*, supper rather than communion is the fare offered. Entering a dialogue, not being in control of all the content, is the greater risk.



But even this won't work with everybody. Analysis of who goes to *Alpha*⁸ suggests that it is very effective with the groups I mentioned. But for the non-churched, it starts too far on in beliefs. For the deeply post-modern, it is too structured by being a course. For those who live at the address of pluralism, in the political apathy generated by spin and the post-modern deconstruction of all verbal claims, this too is starting in the wrong place. These factors make evangelism in word alone increasingly suspect, especially to younger generations. We have entered a “*show me, don't tell me*” world. It is a culture which is deeply suspicious, in which the small print is read first because that is where all the bad news sits.

If however we are called to work with communities that are deprived or fractured, with people who want nothing to do with church, to invite their attendance at worship will be incomprehensible and irrelevant, but evangelism will be probably worse. It could be regarded as naff or a manipulative act by a suspicious, untrustworthy and external group. Yet further away from public worship and nearer to where they are, it seems we are compelled to begin with forming **community**. But note it is a matter of seeking to work with them for the sake of their community, not initially imposing our own form of community. However, we will be called at the same time to model attractive, authentic community.

⁸ See Steve Hunt *The Alpha Enterprise* Ashgate Publishing 2004

Way beyond a worship-centred approach and emerging beyond the relational evangelism focus **we are seeing a growth in the significance of community as the starting point of mission.** Alan Kreider in *Grove Liturgical Study 32 Worship and Evangelism in Pre-Christendom* shows that the quality of community life was the evangelistically effective force in the Early Church. They lived the Sermon on the Mount by being socially more inclusive, sharing common funds, resisting materialism, doing acts of mercy, praying for the sick more effectively than the pagans and affirming the role of the less articulate – then the slaves and women. “*See how these Christians love one another*” is the very old exasperated comment from a 2nd century critic.⁹ No wonder the most common injunction in the epistles is to love one another.

As then, **only where there is attractive and transforming community will we today see effective and lasting mission.** Forming a sense of belonging and/or community is the single most significant human factor in the success of *Alpha* and the one most difficult to reproduce in the wider church, making the jump from *Alpha* very hard. The tragedy is so many congregations are woefully short of being attractive, transforming and spiritual.

With the most hostile group, all I imagine we can do is to say sorry. If there is a glimmer of opportunity, genuine apology may open a door to relationships. I note some church leaders have chosen to express apology in the last ten years. If their pain or anger is too high we shall only receive more criticism or worse. The Beatitudes tell you how to handle that.

I came to this diagram simply because it was a pattern I saw by visiting emerging church plants and fresh expressions of church in Cardiff and near Bradford initially.¹⁰ They were doing this intuitively. No one had shown them this matrix. My experience of being with them unlocked my understanding and this matrix is a way of interpreting it. I have since seen it repeated in many places.

⁹ Tertullian *Apologeticum* chapter 39, 7

¹⁰ These stories became the first two in the Encounters on the Edge series

There is one other aspect that matters very much. **The dynamics within the matrix only work from right to left.** It is quite possible to use the starting place of growing convincing community to sail to nearly all the groups. But you cannot sail from the port of invitation to public worship to the right hand side of the matrix.

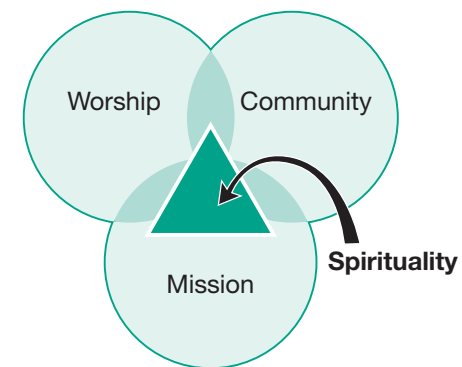
Attendance:	fringe	open de-churched	non-churched	closed de-churched
Attitude:	Christendom	pre-Christian	post-Christian	anti-Christian
Climate:	warm	cool	cold	arctic
Start point:	public WORSHIP	relational EVANGELISM	COMMUNITY theirs and ours	genuine apology



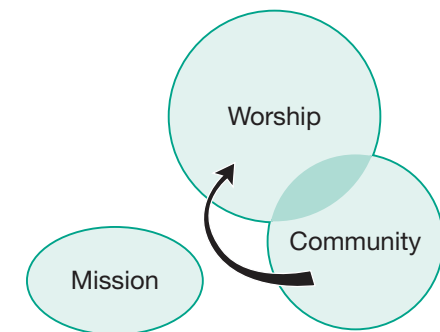
In conclusion, the key is to know that there are different starting points for different groups, which is exactly what we should expect if mission shapes church. **This will help prevent us from cloning existing church, including its historical starting points,** for lack of wisdom or insight. As the western world becomes more culturally distanced from historic Christianity and more diverse in its forms, this consideration should become absolutely basic in the planning process for where to start out on the sailing journey to form fresh expressions of church. This awareness is needed now, but it will take a change of mind to achieve.

Re-examining worship, community and mission

This is a different approach to how we used to think. To understand this, go back to the theory about the functions of church from Robert Warren.¹¹ What does church do? It worships, offers community and acts in mission. Spirituality beats at the heart of these three activities.



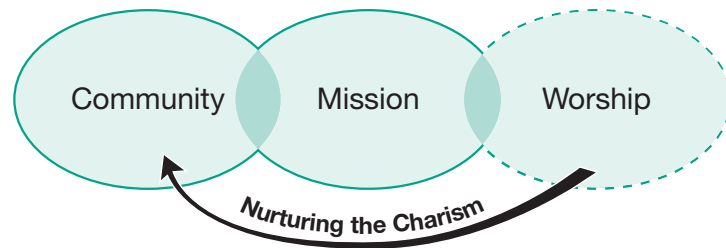
However contrast that ideal with much western practice. The public worship circle is dominant. That can be measured by the investment of money, time and personnel in buildings, programmes and clergy to run them all. Sadly all too often the community who meet in this building are somewhat dysfunctional and unattractive. As a wag said, **“The main reason others aren’t in church, is because we are.”** In practice, mission is relegated to a weird thing that either happens overseas, or is done by enthusiasts who, thank God, are not people like us.



Trying to make such a beast mission-minded, let alone mission-centred is difficult. Attempts to change it often turn out to lead only to a guilt induced temporary foray out of the fold, in order to invite others to come and worship.

¹¹ Originally explained in Robert Warren *Building Missionary Congregations* Church House Publishing 1995

It seems from field study there is an inherent order in the creation of fresh expressions of church. It is very unlike what I have just caricatured. **It is essential to start with the sent (apostolic) community.** This group go bearing seeds of the gospel and the church. They live in such a way that others are drawn to them; strangers become friends, prompted by what they see to ask questions. As the planting team connect with the culture, learn its language and find its priorities, the shape of mission to that culture or area grows clearer. **Only by being there does the specific shape to the mission emerge.** It is part of connecting with the discernment of what God is doing there.¹²



Only then as local people respond to Christ and are disciplined in the Christian community does indigenous worship slowly begin to emerge. It grows out of the stories of finding faith and stories of answered prayers. It meshes with the local musical culture and local people's creative gifts. What must be characteristic of the worship is that it feeds the life, gifting, calling and aspirations of the growing community. **Monastic groups would describe this process as worship nurturing the charism of the community.**

But note the order. Public Worship does not come first. Indeed it cannot; it must be grown as the community in mission co-operates with God in evolving a mission-shaped church. This story is not a new fangled one. It echoes the practice of the pre-Constantinian Church. Alan Kreider demonstrates the "come to worship" instinct is at great variance with the practice of the New Testament and early church history. Then exclusion from worship was normal. Serious enquirers might be allowed for some parts but they were put out before communion. Undisclosed mystery is always attractive, but the early mission of the church was not conducted through its worship.

¹² This shape was the basis for the *Starting a Fresh Expression* workbook produced by Fresh Expressions Church House Publishing 2006

As Christendom collapses, I am intrigued that we are now moving away from worship as the prime location for mission and how people can learn to belong. This also represents a healthy step outward in risk.

The voyages set by the Spirit

I have argued a pragmatic case for using different starting points in mission. It was supported by showing how people live at different cultural and intellectual addresses, how pioneers are intuitively choosing these different starting points and importantly by the precedent of early church practice which was different from our own.

Oh dear

I hear with concerning frequency some larger churches (particularly in the south) say they don't need mission-shaped church thinking. They plan to tweak the worship they offer and the evangelism they do. "Sailing from Dover is fun and we like it" they might cry. I challenge them to evaluate who has joined them in the past year. What percentage of their recent growth is by transfer and what proportion are converts? Of the latter,

what percentage are from the de-churched and how many are genuinely non-churched? Other churches are now describing the worship they offer as their mission. This is merely changing labels on bottles. Several diocesan training packages linked to *Mission-shaped Church* are very disappointing. They take people no further than a search for what they do best as existing church and then try to make that more available. It is all within the "come to us as we are" mentality. The idea that church might have to be seriously re-imagined or created differently elsewhere, is barely on the horizon. Behind it all is a very worrying assumption. Like the struggling Tory party, too often we still believe the delusion that one more push, in the old way, will solve our lack of appeal. Add a pinch of mission to the existing potion we peddle and people will queue up for it. I wish.

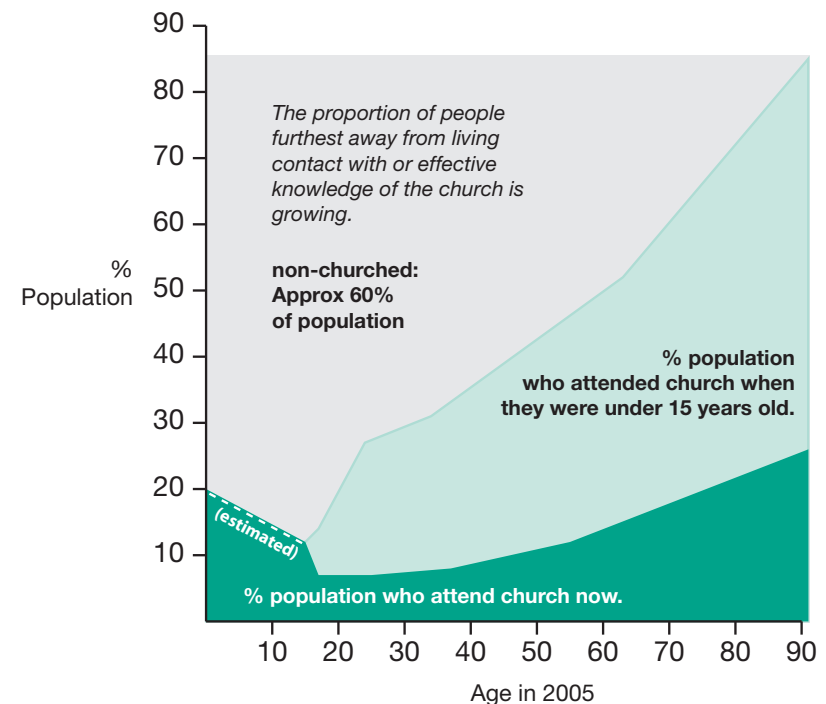


There is a **serious danger that churches are opting only to become a bit more mission-flavoured**. That won't close the gap to the non-churched; it won't bring mission into the DNA of church. It will fail to connect with how Jesus said the Spirit should affect Church. As such, we are ignoring the biblical vision

from Christ our Lord. That apostolic mandate is given in Acts 1.8. "When the Spirit comes, you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and the ends of the earth". This I believe could be a good framework in which to hold what needs to be done. **Acts 1.8 isn't an interesting geography lesson; it is a very disturbing call.** It indicates a journey from the familiar, through the disagreeable, to the unthinkable. It utterly undermines complacency and all mission shaped exclusively around "come to us".

The Judean journey is not enough

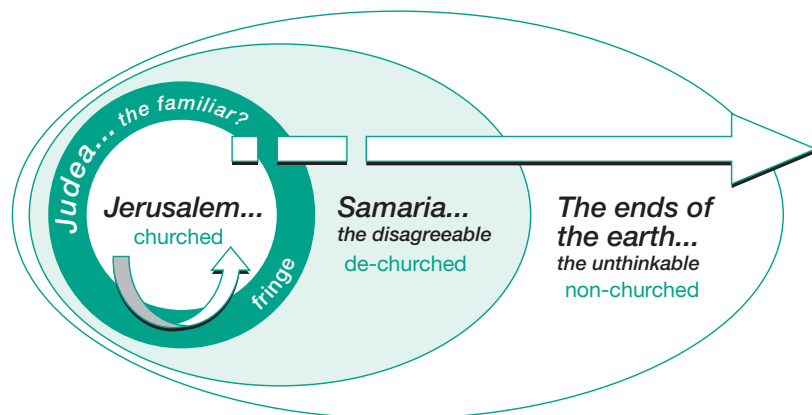
The reality is that inherited ways of being church, and of doing most of our evangelism, helps a reducing minority of people. John Finney's figures from 1992 showed ¼ of those coming to faith were from de-churched backgrounds. The 2004 survey by Steve Hunt of Alpha shows 57% of guests were already church. However, the numbers of the de-churched reduce in each succeeding generation. As far as The Sheffield Centre can see, the de-churched decrease by 8% every decade.



We are doing the vast majority of our fishing in a shrinking pond. We desperately need fresh expressions of church that can begin to connect with our major and expanding mission field who are the non-churched. In the paradigm of Acts 1.8, **the church seems obsessed with Jerusalem-centred ministry.** We focus on people who are churched or those who are comfortable to be our people. If we only make our equivalent of the Judean journey we shall stay in the centre of things and we shall have failed to hear Acts 1.8.

The Samaria safari

Suppose we were to connect more with the de-churched. It might be like that first rather unwelcome mission to Samaria, which Acts 8 indicates was more of an unwelcome surprise than a deliberate plan. Like some de-churched, the Samaritans were alienated from Jerusalem and so deeply dismissive of it and of calls to go there. Is it accidental that John 4 shows us Jesus in conversation with a Samaritan woman in which at no time does he suggest a trip to Jerusalem, but rather living encounter with him where she was? It was relational evangelism at the well, not invitation to worship elsewhere. The Samaritan safari will force us to change the centre of our operations. It can't be done on our turf.



If the figures are vaguely right, there are 3 times as many de-churched as there are attenders and they don't all like what we are or where we are. In that journey, notice from the diagram what happens to the Jerusalem circle. It becomes more minor and no longer in the centre of things. The centre shifts. Yet if mission is rooted in God and his patterns, then the incarnation of God the Son, away from the glories of heaven, should have shown us **that staying where we are at home is not the way of the Trinity.**

The ends of the earth expedition

That is the call from Acts 1.8; that is what the Spirit in the Church will press for. But what is crucial to see is that the outward thrust does not leave the sending church at the centre. Such a disturbing process is reflected in Acts chapters 10-15. By and large we have failed to see this is a theological necessity and should therefore be the effect of fresh expressions on the rest of the church at home. The mission to today's "Gentiles" changes the self-understanding of today's all too "Jewish" people of God. I need to add at this point from Matthew 28 that the word "*ethne*" indicates that **Christ sends us to all people groups, not just geographical locations.** For British Christians, the "ends of the earth" need not be New Zealand; it could be the young people in a Goth group down the road, the travellers on the common, or the new age ecologists in the park.

Mission to the non-churched, brings us into contact with a group among the under 45s who are six times more than those in church. That kind of mission would shape the resultant church still more profoundly and shift the supposed centre more radically. This is the journey to those groups of people who have never darkened our doors and yet who may be deeply spiritual. The process underlines a change in our minds about the nature of the apostolic journey. Mission stops being come-shaped and takes on the go shape. That fits much better with its basic linguistic meaning of being sent.

The shifts of instinct needed are significant and still largely absent in the church:

- From working only to modify existing church, to deliberately seeking the creation of what is different to it, springing out of engagement with "Gentiles".

- From adding numbers to an existing church, to multiplying the number of churches that are shaped by the mission process not pre-shaped in “Jerusalem”.
- From continuing to endorse monopoly, to embracing diversity, allowing the creation of church among those who don’t find the way we do church helpful.

These are very demanding changes. But the mission-shaped church process is not just for the trendy. Acts 1.8 shows it is a process for all. To understand what is meant by *Mission-shaped Church* is to see a more radical but more biblical agenda for mission.

Own up

What is essential is that we become more honest about which ports we are sailing from and which destinations we are currently journeying to. “Judea” is doubtless a nice place and there are people living there who are loved by God and some of us are sent there. What is disturbing is that so few recognise that it is the major port the western church sails to and that **this journey is almost completely incapable of teaching us how to journey to “Samaria”**, let alone the “ends of the earth”. Most people in the UK do not live in “Judea” and Acts 1.8 will not let us think that is where the journey ends. I do not want to be judgmental or discouraging but I think we should ask how many examples in the fresh expressions website database are just Judean journeys and how many are to our “Samaria” and our “ends of the earth”.

As such some current use of edge and centre language is dangerous. It colludes with the view that church is central, the edge is odd and only the brave and the foolish go there. The reality is that God in Christ is central. He is wonderfully portable. The Holy Spirit is deeply centrifugal and **it is normal, and normative, for the church to journey out beyond where it finds itself**.¹³ I am deeply concerned that the church is in long, deep and blind disobedience to this mandate from Acts.

¹³ See *Hope from the Margins: New Ways of Being Church* Stuart Murray and Anne Wilkinson-Hayes Grove Evangelism Series no.49

The nature of the journey

Beware the waters of shallow thinking

Looking at the UK scene now *Mission-shaped Church* is over two years old, I think I see a couple of delusions that could make us think we are getting somewhere but actually it may not be so. One such naïve wish is thinking we can derive mission passion or priority from ministerial re-organisation. It is impossible. The latter is a delivery support system; the former is a value. **You can no more choose the right course to steer by altering who does the cooking on the boat.** I confess that though some dioceses are putting clergy into wider groupings that have mission area labels, I am not convinced how much truly missional change will come from it.

The other danger is somehow imagining that calling something a fresh expression changes very much. I am reminded of New Testament texts like “*By their fruits you shall know them*” and “*Can a fig bear thistles?*”. In a way I am glad that vigorous discussions about the best language to use will be secondary. The church as institution has a tendency to subvert all phrases we select. I recall the Church Times cartoon showing Gregory with his mission-shaped dog. A fresh expression sometimes now only means something a particular local church hasn’t yet done such as starting a family service. **The issue is not what they are called, but with whom do they connect** and does this bear fruit in lives changed by encounter with Christ.



Gregory even had a mission-shaped sausage dog

credit: Revd Ron Wood,
cartoonist for the
Church Times

The voyage changes the sailor

If Freddy and Felicity make it to their port, they won’t be the same as how they started. What they will have seen, how they interacted and what they learnt in new skills will have changed them. I know something of how the last nine years has changed what I think and even how I know things. I still hold to the supremacy of scripture, an authority derived from God, as the basis of faith and life for church and individual. But my journey has disturbed and

rearranged what I thought the scriptures must mean. Those who pioneer fresh expressions will have similar stories. **If being in mission truly shapes what church grows to be, we must increase our tolerance for surprises and discoveries.** This chimes in closely with the title of Vincent Donovan's celebrated book *Christianity Rediscovered*. It is deeply surprising that a Catholic could choose such a title, for all that is essential is thought to be already given. Is it legitimate to think that being in mission with God can change how we understand things?

I take some solace from the early church that they too were like me. The first 13 chapters of Acts reveal a church slow to hear and change their minds. What is worse is that they had advantages denied to me. They were, or knew first-hand, people who saw and heard the risen Christ. They had similarly more immediate access to the first Pentecost and its aftermath. For all those gains, they seem to remain oblivious to Jesus' words in Acts 1.8. The best that can be said is that the converts at Pentecost from around the Mediterranean dispersed back to their native lands and took something with them.¹⁴

Handling the complaints of Grecian Jewish widows is not the most obvious training ground for miracles, robust apologetics and unprecedented mission to real outsiders. Yet that is not unfair to the story of Stephen and Philip who make being a deacon look positively riveting. The church gets disturbed out of its Jerusalem assumptions first because of unplanned persecution. Even then it is an indicator of the dominant inward mindset that the apostles are

those who stay behind [8.1]. Thrown out of the nest

and acting way beyond any job description, we next see the pioneer idiocy of Philip going to Samaria, hardly the obvious port of call for any self-respecting Jew. The dramatic and positive response there sucks in Peter and John (8.14-17) which looks like a quality control inspection, and a wider authorising of who may obviously receive the Holy Spirit. What is most noteworthy for our purposes is verse 25 which comments that Peter and John preach



¹⁴ Colin Buchanan *Is the Church of England Biblical?* DLT 1998 p.56

in other Samaritan villages on their way back. The experience is beginning to change them.

Chapter 9 covers the unplanned and initially doubted conversion of Saul, with his clear call to the Gentiles (9.15) then followed in chapter 10 by the disturbance of Peter's midday nap and his mental maps on the rooftop in Joppa.¹⁵ Peter moves from rejection of this call, by some direct intervention of the Spirit (10.19-20) overcoming his hesitation. He takes others with him as though for protection, admits to his changing realisations (10.34) and still is astonished (10.45) at the outpouring of the Spirit on Gentiles. Then his impetuosity and the ability to change his mind when confronted lead to the resultant baptism and staying with these Gentiles as fellow followers of Christ (10.47-48). Deep criticism back in Jerusalem follows (11.1-18) but the conclusion is only that Gentiles can be allowed in, not that it is normal that Jews should go to Gentiles. Frankly they still didn't get it. **Church history is littered with similar "stay at home" attitudes.**

Within the story I note several elements. The direct intervention of the Spirit with outsiders and insiders is essential. Without this, there would be no story. This fits with the Acts 1.8 mandate that is essentially a Spirit-pulsed process. However, **the role of God-fearers like Cornelius is also important.** This is not so much for being receptors of the Spirit, for he is always free to blow where he wills. Rather, it is that they, in one sense, evangelise the inward looking church, to good news which surprises it. I ask who are the equivalents of Cornelius today, not because I know the answer, but because it looks like the right question. The other figure of interest is Simon the Tanner. I am no expert on this but some of us suspect this dirty job doesn't look a very kosher set up. So had Peter already unwittingly put himself in the place where he could more easily make the jumps in thought that were about to break upon him?¹⁶ Going back to my dominant analogy, all this looks like authentication that the journey of mission changes the sailor. **Being caught up in the mission of God can change the self-perception of the church of God.** As such, I don't share the view of some that the Acts narrative does not teach theological truth. I find exactly the reverse. It is precisely by living through the narrative that enabled the truth to be re-evaluated.

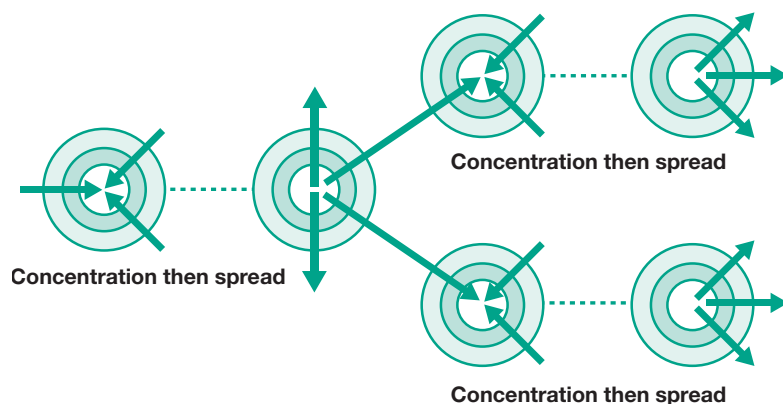
¹⁵ For an extended application of this key chapter, see Mike Riddell *Threshold of the Future* SPCK 1998 chapter 1

¹⁶ My thanks to Graham Horsley and Stephen Rymer for conversations that helped me notice this.

In practice today, those who are the natural networkers in our own church communities are likely to be those who meet the Cornelius figures.¹⁷ Those who happily chat at the school gate, those who invite relative strangers to meals and those who like being with those who don't share their faith; all these may well find the joy of surprising conversations and invitations. They may well have to endure the suspicion of the rest of the church but can be encouraged. It was ever thus and they must continue to be gracious disturbers of the church's false peace.

Concentration and spread

I am grateful to Bob Hopkins of Anglican Church Planting Initiatives for first pointing out to me a dynamic process that occurs three times within the Acts narrative. I can here only headline what seems to me to be a very plausible picture that further demonstrates the way the journey changes the sailor. We know this pattern as *Concentration and Spread* theory. It is a very old process that God teaches to his people, rooted as far back as the covenant with Abraham. It is related to Newbigin's insistence that election and mission must remain connected, to avoid either pride or activism.¹⁸ Simply put, **God gathers resources partly to disperse them more widely than before**, so that knowledge of his gracious will and acts is spread. But the church is slow to pick up on this dynamic. In the Acts cycles, the first gathering is in Jerusalem around the 12 and the word spreads (6.7). **The first dispersal**



¹⁷ See also Michael Moynagh *Emerging Church.Intro* Monarch Books 2005 p.113 on the importance of networkers

¹⁸ Lesslie Newbigin *The Household of God* SCM Press 1952 chapter 6

comes through unwanted persecution (8.1) and I have already examined some of the surprises within that cycle. The result is growth in Judea, Galilee and Samaria (9.31). I note the partial fulfilment and correspondence here to the Acts 1.8 mandate.

The second concentration is at Antioch, drawing in some who were previously dispersed (11.19) including notably those from Cyprus who had begun to speak to Greeks very effectively (11.20-21). Perhaps they were already bi-cultural people and so that change of who they were communicating with was more natural. Today, we notice it is the new converts who are among the most eloquent witnesses and who have the relationships among other non-churched people. Barnabas is sent from Jerusalem to Antioch. Once again, the feeling is that this is an inspection visit. To send an indefatigable encourager may not have been a good choice to secure tight Jewish control. He in turn brings Paul, the Jewish Roman citizen from Tarsus, who also had a bicultural advantage in background. **The second concentration phase ends not with persecution but with a Spirit-led call** (13.1-3). My own conviction now is that the church was better able to hear that call precisely because it had been through the disturbances carefully noted by Luke from Acts 6 onwards.

The third recorded concentration is in Ephesus, lasting over two years (19.8-10) and which seems to have spread (19.10) to the whole province. The overlaps of the letters to Ephesus, Colossae and Philemon and the later correspondence to the seven churches in Revelation may point to the claim that **this time, the dispersal was neither by persecution, nor even call, but was understood as normal by the church**. As such, the church is showing that its own missionary journey is changing its self-understanding. It is called into being by God, but he gathers it so that it may also be dispersed. Thus the church fulfils the mandate given by Christ and the Spirit to continue to be sent to wherever and whatever is the "Judea", "Samaria" and "ends of the earth".

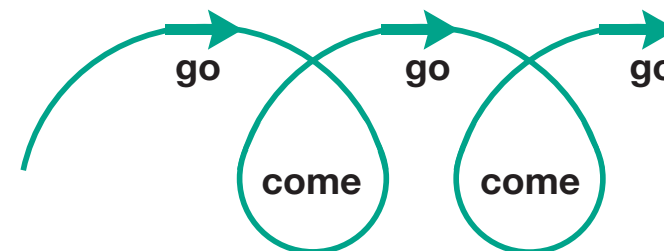
Today in the UK, these addresses are more helpfully thought of as cultural identities not just postcodes. This is also not new. The first century Christian Jewish problem was not being with Jews living in Rome, it was being with Romans like Cornelius living in Jewry. Their problem was an ecclesial one

but it was solved, or you might say exploded, by a missional process. I suspect these times are back with us. The voyage changes the sailors.

So then there are two factors that lead to a set of courses the church is called to sail. Firstly, the destination in the long term is always outwards. Each Christian community must discern whether at any given period it is to the “Judea” of its current fringe, to the Samaritans from whom it has become distanced, say the de-churched, or the call from Christ and the Spirit to the ends of earth, those non-churched whose lives we have not yet touched. **What is quite clear is that though times of concentration are encouraged, this cannot solve the problems of inadequate dispersal.** Yet this is what most of the church appears to be doing. Secondly, the concentration and dispersal theory suggests what we cannot do by informed instinct, pioneers may be called to model, and if that doesn’t work, the church may face still more disruptive forces in the economy of God, in order to send it out and help it recover from its amnesia.

The journey works in loops

I recently realised that over the last few years those of us who have been urging an outward focus, and a missionary cross-cultural journey, have been in danger of polarising the words “come” and “go”. Listening to some rhetoric it almost seems “come” is a Christendom vice and “go” is a missionary virtue. I suggest this is ultimately a false distinction and over-separation. I would rather suggest there are “come” phases within the deeper “go” paradigm. In the life of Christ, he is sent and so goes into this world. This pattern is endorsed and repeated in the seminal text *“As the Father has sent me so I am sending you”* John 20.21. But within this framework, he notably invites the heavy-laden to come to him, and all potential disciples to follow him. This suggests to me an ellipse that loops back before moving ahead again. It is some sort of virtuous spiral, most certainly not a circle but it moves outwards not upwards.



In the past I heard people like John Stott speak of the cyclic rhythm of worship and mission and in the short term it may look like that. But this does not do justice to the pattern shown by Christ; it conflicts with the Acts 1.8 outward progression and the concentration and dispersal theory. However, I do not suggest the loop is a regression. It is the positive process by which a sent community truly engages with a culture. By the attraction of the living Christ animating its communal life, manifesting the quality of love he brings, and living out a spirituality that connects faith and life, other people come to this strange group and join the community. This is good but the mistake is to think that all has now been done and the community can continue to attract and get bigger. At that point, all that this issue is arguing for gets lost and the temptation to revert to the Judean journey slides in, or worse the very story that started the ellipse in the first place is forgotten.

Distances and courses

Once outside the harbour, from Dover to Calais is a particular course of about 24 miles. Falmouth to the Falklands is a number of courses and far longer. There are particular hazards on each trip. The English Channel is perhaps the busiest navigable water in the world. The danger is a collision. Going to the Falklands, the issues include having enough provisions to last the journey and negotiating the weather met in different latitudes.

If we are called on a Samaria safari the issues of what the de-churched have to unlearn will be important. For example, “alternative worship” communities have found that the de-churched (to whom they appeal) are adverse to forms of mission because of various unhelpful pressures brought on them in previous church experience. It has taken a decade for some of them to recover from this tendency.

If cultural “ends of the earth” is the destination, say with clubbers, people in extreme sports, young adults in new city centre locations, those in new age fairs or with many on housing estates, then issues of discipleship are common. The discovery of Jesus often goes down well, but the demands of a new Lord can run seriously contrary to a post-modern, pic’n’mix, self-determining lifestyle. It will take a long time to build trust, establish relationships, make the faith journey and grow disciples. **Those in the wider church who invest in the ends of the earth expedition should not expect quick returns.**

I would be doing people a disservice if I seem to imply that the de-churched or the non-churched are each one undifferentiated group. This is not so. Both will include those open and those closed, at present, to contact with Christians. It will also include those who still have a living Christian faith but no longer attend a congregation and those who were nominal attenders but not more than that. Each of these groups demand a different course set and the expressions of church that will evolve to be how they can live out discipleship may well look different.

With the non-churched, I commend the speculative but plausible groupings given by John Drane.¹⁹ He admits to inventing the labels: desperate poor, hedonists, traditionalists, spiritual searchers, corporate achievers, secularists and apathetic. Helpfully, he suggests both points of entry to their different worlds and points of counter-cultural challenge that Christ’s good news will bring in each case.

¹⁹ John Drane *The McDonaldisation of the Church* Darton, Longman and Todd 2000 pp. 59-84

What matters

I yearn for repentance that we have still not really heard the call to go beyond “Jerusalem” and the focus on our own people.

I long for honesty about what is being done. Candid admission of a church making a good Judean journey would please me more than self-deception about a trip to the “ends of the earth”. However, the church needs to obey the Spirit’s call to travel beyond its Judea.

I hanker after clarity in the wider church about the different courses that can be broadly set, depending on where we need to travel to.

I care that the lessons the pioneers have identified at some cost, in the last ten years, should be put to good use.

George Lings
April 2006

Cartoons: Tim Sharp

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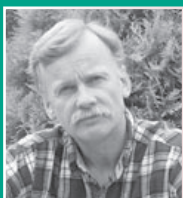
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As more people sail off on the adventure of starting fresh expressions of church, it is apparent that many lack crucial information that would help them steer better. Local and wider church leaders also need ways of assessing what has been begun and how this fits with an overall map of the mission task pointed up by Scripture. This issue offers some tactical and biblical frameworks. I hope people will see more clearly where they are now and begin to hear what God might be calling for beyond that.

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