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A Growing Church?

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By every measure religious observance in Great Britain continues to fall. Of course, ‘declining’ churches can also still be terrifically graceful communities of good news, growth, and resistance to evil. I came to Methodism through one of them, and was trained for ministry by another, praise God.

Despite a noted decline in religious observance, the patterns, rituals, and liturgies of our culture (Tom Stuckey’s Babylon) however misplaced, still testify to the same longing for identity, meaning, and security that we have always had. By liturgies here I do not mean things that happen in worship or church: I am using the term broadly to describe shared rituals that generate and affirm meaning, small patterns of actions that become more than themselves as they form habits of community.

We still practice near universal patterns of faith, just not faith in God: think of what collective confidence we have as a public society in the value of cash, or the power of debit cards. We believe together that these scraps of paper and plastic can be exchanged for food, transport, clothing. Of course, they make us valuable to each other and to our collective society as consumers, not as neighbours. And they are based on a collectively accepted lie which is harder and harder to sustain as more people are closed out of their circle.



James K. A. Smith has written about the shared patterns of life that have replaced shared religious observance: the liturgies of the mall, marketplace, academy, office, and public media. How do I reinforce my sense of self, or effect a transformation? I go shopping. Then I bring my shopping back to my private space. What is success? A lottery win, or bigger, more securely ‘owned’ private space. Safety, self-protection. The problem is that without continued consumption, I lose my identity and place in society, in the liturgical world of the marketplace. It is wrong not because the longing and hope expressed in it is not real, but because it doesn’t deliver.

Meanwhile, the things of our historic Christian faith, especially collective and shared faith, are more and more a foreign language even to those of us in church every week. An attractive language, perhaps, but a foreign one. This leaves us with a hill to climb to re-introduce the things of church in such a way as they are recognisably good and connect with all our lives.

For some of us, the rituals of this common culture are likewise a foreign language. One morning recently I found a current betting slip from the local branch of a national betting shop blown in among the overnight food wrappers and bottles in my porch, just off City Road in central London. It was in date, and had two sets of three football matches described in an easy to read list: “Both teams to score and Team to Win”. “If all selections are correct”, the slip advised me, on presentation of this receipt I would win £37.40 on the first stake, and £140.83 on the second. But had I won? Or more properly, had the person whom the wind took this off overnight won? Here I was, ignorant of one of the most common ways my neighbours express hope, day by day, week by week. Think of the betting slip as an order of service. To produce it there had been real individual engagement, planning, investment, and actual risk on the basis of a combination of hope and experience. This reminded me of the need to be far more light-footed, multi-lingual, cross cultural awareness to even begin to be able to speak to our present age.

Of course churches continue to grow - in the United Kingdom and overseas both. But ‘successful’ growing churches can have their own troubles, some of which Tom notes in his chapter on ‘A Growing Church – there and here.’ If numerical growth was all we looked for, we would hand out a five pound note on the door and another if you stayed the hour. Some examples of ‘growing’ churches have theology which does just that. Alternately, some of us grow by playing on fears or existing social, political, or cultural divisions. This is as true locally as internationally, and it is not a strong foundation for Christian community.

Real growth is slow, durable, supple in dealing with conflict, humble and willing to risk diversity; Christ-centred, in other words. In the British Methodist Churches, growth has reliably come where we have pastoral continuity and excellence in worship, week by week, of whatever liturgical tradition. ‘Excellence’ does not mean worship as slick performance or where nothing ever goes wrong, but worship which grapples intelligently with scripture and relaxes into the best of our tradition with confidence. Growth has also come where we have recognised the vocations, membership, and presence of black British and Asian children and adults among our local membership. Where we have failed in that, or not been able to receive the full discipleship of LGBT+ or other minority ethnic, class, or political communities, we have seen less growth. Only the most tenacious of us stay in places where our hope for identity and belonging does not get touched by the actual patterns of church life, or where faith stops at the church door instead of extending to advocacy and service.

It seems to me that worked out in present pastoral contexts, churches will grow wherever we can resist and replace our culture’s means of pseudo-grace with the real thing. Not by condemning shopping and safety and the rest, but by respecting the hunger that we all share, and modelling a different way. Here John Wesley’s

‘Means of Grace’ finds its twenty-first century evangelical traction. And yes, we do preach and model the need to work for transformation: who would bother going to a gym that took your money and time and did not tell the truth about the need to sweat, day by day and week by week?

E. Byron Anderson has argued in his 2003 book **Worship and Christian Identity, Practising Ourselves** for a re-understanding of the purpose of worship, as the ‘formation of a ‘theonomous’ self,’ that is a self not characterised by thick-skinned resistance to the world around (autonomous) but in growing a relationship with the Triune God and the multilayered context in which we live. Growing churches will look not to separate from the world nor to despise it, but to develop this kind of critical, liberating relation to it.

“What we have to do about the Church is not organize it as a society, but to inhabit it as a climate or a landscape.” So writes Rowan Williams, and so recommends Tom Stuckey at the end of his chapter on church growth (p.56).

Despite the examples of joy, grace, and just action we see even in ‘declining’ churches, we know our Methodist way of institutional life has lost the attention of the world around us. But there is hope, and not in trying to be what we are not, but in remembering the best and simplest that we are.

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