

BOOK REVIEW

by

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Methodist ministers struggling to effect change in their churches should read **Pioneering a New Future: A guide to shaping change and changing the shape of the church** (The Bible Reading Fellowship 2015, £7.99). Phil Potter is the Archbishops' Missioner and team leader of Fresh Expressions and this is a welcome reprint of his 2009 book. Here is not only a practical guide for taking a declining church from death to life but this is a book so rich in Biblical insight that it inspires and motivates. Drawing on the experience of a twenty year ministry in Haydock, Merseyside, the author charts the church's journey through the stages of reviewing, reordering, reconstructing, re-inventing, releasing and reproducing.

Looking at how a particular church in a particular place is transformed is not always helpful. Mission is contextual. What may work for a church in one place is not readily transferable to another. This book however in its breadth and understanding contains wisdom readily applicable for most situations. Although management models lurk in the background the mechanics of change are never 'in your face'. The foreground is taken up with Bible, story, theology and personal experience. We are invited to reflect with Isaiah and Mark, and to travel with Jonah, Abraham, Moses and Joshua. Phil Potter wants us discover what they discovered as we move to the final vision of Revelation 21.

Hunger and hurt are his starting points. Congregations will not care about the visions of a minister until they know that the minister cares for them! A real pastoral relationship with the members of the church and a valuing of what the church values is paramount. Before the future can be contemplated, the past must be harnessed and honoured. Past wounds may have to be healed. Only then can the dreaming begin.

In identifying goals the author encourages us to turn from management models and to look at a game of football. Leaders lead not by imparting information but rather by communicating inspiration. Dreams should be big, goals small. Achieving a modest target creates energy. It is important to include everyone. Consensus cannot always be achieved so some compromise is essential. People move at different speeds. Within a congregation identify those lay people who are the connectors, the communicators and the convincers. They will take the congregation forward.

Potter believes a huge paradigm shift is required of us. Over the past five decades different

styles and methods of church growth have been employed as we have increasingly recognised the importance of cultural diversity. Yet, he argues, even with a sophisticated initiative like Alpha we are still patching old wineskins as we attempt to fill them with new wine. The old wineskins have now to be abandoned.

The old paradigm was based on the model of attracting people in. The new paradigm centres on the dispersed church of Christians in the community. The sacred space of the temple in Acts 2 is less significant than the actions, worship and fellowship of small groups of Christians in the community who 'do little things in a big way'. Potter's vision is not unlike John Vincent's (whose book I recently reviewed) except that, unlike Vincent, he puts no limits on the possibilities of numerical growth. Think about the parable of the mustard seed!

A truly 'mission shaped church' is made up of Christians who spin webs in the community. The Church should cease to think of itself as a large symphony orchestra with a conductor but rather begin to operate like a jazz band. Traditional church is like a swimming pool where people are invited to jump in. We are now required to do something even more nerve racking. We are called to be 'surfers'.

In spite of his emphasis on the profusion and diversity of new shapes of church (and in chapter five he gives some examples) Potter does not reject Traditional Church. As the Archbishop's Missioner he will have seen how Anglican Cathedrals are successfully re-inventing themselves. The author in his book demonstrates a concern for those older members who may feel left behind or no longer needed. Thus his book achieves a mature balance between the past and the future, the young and the old.

Questions at the end of each of the eight chapters make this a suitable book for study within both the traditional churches and fresh expressions. The writer has captured the spirit of John Wesley whom he quotes with approval. 'Give me one hundred preachers who fear nothing but sin and desire nothing but God and I care not a straw whether they be clergy or lay, such alone will shake the gates of hell and set up the kingdom of heaven on earth'.