

THE TIME IS SHORT

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(Amended form of the address given by the President at the Ministerial Session of Conference 2006)

My Conference Address at Torquay focused on the twin themes of 'theology' and 'the person of the Holy Spirit'. That address finished with the wave-beat of the sea; the gentle caress of the Spirit. Let's start where I left off. Jesus walks beside the sea and calls disciples after he has announced 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of heaven is at hand; repent and believe in the Gospel'. (Mk.1.15-16).

There are two Greek words for 'time', *chronos* and *kairos*. The first word is clock-time measured by chronometers, the second relates to that moment when linear time and eternity are encapsulated in a single elective moment of opportunity. Unless an immediate response is made God's *kairos* passes.

Methodism is approaching a *kairos* moment; a brief window of opportunity possibly only five years at the most, in which to turn the Church around, or to be more accurate 'to repent and believe'. To repent is another way of saying we face reality and change decisively. To believe is another way of saying we must trust God and risk all. The *kairos* moment is now. What leads me to say this?

PART 1 - READING THE SIGNS

1. We are destroying the very planet which sustains our life.

The four horsemen of the apocalypse are already galloping across our planet leaving trails of destruction in their wake. The white horse of imperialism - some would say American globalisation; the fiery red horse of military invasion and terrorist atrocity; the black horse of plague famine and natural disaster and finally the pale horse of death –death from the carbon emissions which blot out the sun.

I explained in my book *Into the Far Country* that the rainbow covenant established through Noah is the foundational covenant of mission. This puts humanity's responsibility for the planet on the mission agenda. Christians must link hands with people of good-will, regardless of religion or race in a global mission to save the planet. The time is short. We must repent and believe!

2. The violent clash of cultures

In his book *Apocalypse Now*, Duncan Forester tells how when he heard the news of the destruction of the twin towers on 9/11, he opened his Bible and read Mark 13. He suggests we no longer stand optimistically at the end of history but have entered an age of terror where 'Apocalyptic theology' becomes an essential theological key for understanding the truth behind events. We may be facing a new 'Dark Age' of fanatical religious conflicts. Are we theologically equipped? The Church must quickly jettison surplice baggage, recover essential Gospel priorities and assume flexible forms to survive in such a time as this. We must repent and believe!

3. The shifting centre of Christianity

Almost 60% of Christians live in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Pacific. Pentecostal growth has transformed the global Christian landscape. The era of Western liberal Christianity is passing and the day of Southern conservative Christianity has dawned. We have to wrestle not just with theological diversity but with a possible collision between liberal and conservative theologies. The future of the rich Western Church lies in becoming a receiving Church in which we allow the fast growing conservative churches of the poor challenges our culture, our wealth, our traditional superiority, our complacency and the liberal nature of our Christianity. Can we contemplate such a challenge as gift? We must repent and believe!

4. The rising Spirit within our own culture

The prophets of the 60s predicted the demise of religion as the God of the gaps was pushed out. This has not happened; instead religion is enjoying a remarkable renaissance. The process of secularization has 'de-regulated' religion. In our contemporary narcissistic culture of choice, DIY spirituality, virtual reality, fantasy, magic and dark superstition reign. Outsiders are not looking to the institutional Church for their religion. Can the Church plant itself in this new culture? We must repent and believe! We must change and take risks.

5. The Edge of Pentecost

God's Spirit blows in waves of grace and has been doing so throughout history as peoples, nations and communities are given their own *kairos* moment. Is this moment now approaching us in Britain? For years we have lived with decline and accepted it as the norm. What if the wind of the Spirit is starting to blow over our dry bones? In my preaching around the Connexion I have become more and more aware of desperate hunger for the Word of God. What if the shortage of ministers is God's vehicle for breaking the cycle of parental dependency which exists between some ministers and Churches? Could our decline be the work of God as he breaks us down in order to lead us to true repentance and faith?

What is the Spirit saying to us? I believe God is saying we stand on the edge of Pentecost and that church growth is possible. According to Orlando Costas there are four features:

- 'numerical' growth.
- 'organic' growth where the organisation and structure becomes fluid and flexible enough to take account of the Church's context and the movement of the Spirit.
- 'conceptual' growth. If there is no theological, emotional and spiritual development then despite numerical increase, the Church is not growing.
- 'incarnational' growth. This relates to the degree in which the Church is prophetically participating in the afflictions of the world through prayer, action and identification with the powerless and marginalized.

'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of heaven is at hand; repent and believe in the Gospel.

PART 2 - THE CHURCH RESHAPED

John Hull in his theological critique of Mission-Shaped Church reminds us of a splendid sentence. 'Start with the Church and the mission will probably get lost. Start with mission and it is likely that the Church will be found'.

There is a brief opportunity for traditional Church as the last baby boomer generation who attended Sunday School become senior citizens. Some of these will look to traditional Church. After that the only advanced will come from cross-cultural evangelism.

We have reached the end of 'generational' growth whereby children of Christian parents, through the processes of baptism, Sunday school, and confirmation become future members of the Church. A seismic cultural shift has taken place leaving three generations out of touch with Christian culture and tradition. Further, those seeking God are no longer prepared to fight their way through what they regard as a jungle of obsolete ecclesiastical baggage to enter a church building which has all the features of a heritage site housing a nostalgic community.

Making new Christians has to be the principle aim and 'fresh expressions' a way of achieving it. Nevertheless as the apocalyptic symptoms of violence increase some outsiders, seeking refuge, may turn to some traditional forms of Church (for example the cathedrals). We have to evolve a 'mixed economy' Church. 'Fresh expressions', which are multiplying at an encouraging rate, provide a hopeful counterpoint to the decline of traditional Church. In future there will be far fewer church buildings and a greater use made of renting secular properties.

Some 'fresh expressions' as described in *Mission Shaped Church* look like the offspring of traditional Church who, like the children of an aging parents still carrying the powerful genes of past ideas of Church. While some 'fresh expressions' are very imaginative others do little more than exchange the organ for the piano, or use power-point instead of hymn-books believing this will make a significant

difference. Many 'fresh expressions' are not radical enough since they do not adequately express 'kingdom theology' which is essential if we are in the business of changing the world and not simply preserving the Church.

I believe we must explore a third theologically adventuresome alternative which I shall label 'emerged Church'. I suggested in my book *Into the Far Country* that such communities are neither planted nor the product of 'pioneer' ministry. They are kingdom communities springing from the soil of some particular need beyond the borders of Church. They are fluid, inclusive and transient. Such 'churches' pose difficult theological questions and raise acute issues of oversight. We have few people, either lay or ordained, who have the necessary gifts or are suitable training to work with such radical forms of Church. What 'emerged' Churches require is a 'theological consultant' rather than a pioneer minister or leader.

A 'mixed economy' Church will have main three models.

- Traditional Church, re-modelled, opened up, user friendly with worship which is vibrant and relevant to those attending.
- Fresh expressions, sometimes meeting on Church premises and sometimes not; certainly not tied to Sunday for worship. The result of 'pioneering ministries'
- Emerged Church, transient, springing up through the Spirit and requiring very special gifts of ministry.

What I am suggesting is not new. The first two models were embraced by the first Methodists who attended the parish Church and the Methodist Society. The last model was advocated in the sixties but suffered from a secularized theology. Then along came charismatic movement bringing a renewal of worship. What I am seeking is a theological synthesis. Our contemporary culture is very different from the sixties. It is not longer optimistic; it is more diverse, plural and violent. We failed to seize opportunities in the past; will it be any different now that God's judgement is falling more heavily upon the Church?

Now is the time when we must repent which is another way of saying we must face reality and change decisively. Now is the time when we must 'believe' which is another way of saying we must trust God and risk all.

PART 3 - NECESSARY CHANGES

If we are not to miss the *kairos* moment what must be done? In my travels I have repeatedly encountered the following:

- Ministers burdened by the Connexional obsession with 'form filling'.
- The resistance of congregations to change and their blindness to the bigger picture.
- ministers and superintendents bogged down in maintenance models of ministry
- the unwillingness or inability of many of our ordained ministers to work in a team with each other and with lay people
- Frustrated persons (ministers and lay people) who have the vision and gifts to make a difference but who are not given the opportunity to exercise them.

I list some immediate tasks.

1. Focus Leadership

Encourage diversity across the Connexion but also focus leadership clearly in the persons of the Presidency team (both present, ex and past), the General Secretary, (for Conference) and District Chairs (for Synod). Some of these should be bishops. The Connexional Team to relinquish what is perceived in many places to be centralizing control and become more clearly a servicing agency for Conference, Districts and Circuits. Bishops should be apostolic Church planters like the Celtic bishops.

2. Recruit younger Presbyters and Deacons for 'pioneer ministry'.

3. Quickly ordain and licence 100 Local Preachers to the non-stipendiary ministry of word and sacrament.

Let the District licence them to exercise pastoral charge and provide a maintenance ministry and terminal care or some of our traditional churches.

4. Head hunt Presbyters/deacons/lay workers who can work with emerged Churches.

Head-hunt those persons who have the necessary gifts and track record. There must be practical evidence that they can do this. Some ministers think they can but it is more in their imagination than in reality. Such presbyters among them should be stationed outside of the normal matching process. Because such evangelist persons are often individualists we must ensure a system of oversight which provides mentoring, peer learning and mutual accountability.

5. Shift the balance of training from initial to continuing development.

Because the suggestions above confront traditional assumptions that all ministers should be trained at the same level we must approach the issue of competency differently. An annual appraisal system should be linked with a personal development plan and a training programme. Every presbyter, deacon and lay worker should be required to attend courses to maintain their licence or right to minister. The balance of training should be shifted from initial to on-going.

6. Ensure that those with evangelistic gifts in Circuits are released.

Ensure that in specified Circuits within a District at least one member of staff, Presbyter, Deacon or Lay-worker, who having the gift of an evangelist is released from pastoral charge and given responsibility for generating a 'fresh expression' of Church.

7. Shift power from Local Church to Circuit and District.

Provide enabling action to shift power from the Local Church to the Circuit meeting and District as primary resourcing units, giving them legal authority to close resistant Churches, and sell burdensome buildings.

PART 4 - POSTSCRIPT

We stand poised on the edge of sparkling possibilities, but the time short and we have to cast our nets on the other side. We must change direction, act decisively and risk all. That is what repentance and faith is about.

Jesus says, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of heaven is at hand; repent and believe in the Gospel'

He then walks beside the silver sea. So must we.