

A NEW FORMATION, FOR A NEW ERA

Jenny Sinclair addresses the causes of the spiritual malaise across the West, the corresponding degradation experienced by people and the desecration of places in our country. Lamenting that church leaders have not been trained for this moment, and recognising the profound changes going on in the church, she proposes a new formation to equip the people of the churches for the new era, based on an openness to the Spirit and the restoration of the relationship between church, people and with place. This is adapted from a talk on formation and discipleship for Churches Together England, in November, 2021.

I spend my life listening and learning across the churches. My typical week includes conversations with friends who are prophetic, charismatic, church planters and members of religious orders; Pentecostal, Evangelical, Free Church, Catholic and Anglican; both liberal and conservative, and from many different political and cultural backgrounds. But don't just hang out with Christians. I also cherish my Jewish friends, and my non-religious friends in civil society, business and politics. This is my vocation. I soak it all up and it all filters through to the work.

This last couple of years have exposed some hard realities. Hard truths for many of us personally, for our society, and of course about the church. I am in the mood to tell the truth.

The [pandemic](#) has brought our troubles into sharp focus, but they are not new. We are in the middle of a very deep spiritual malaise, driven by forces which have been corroding our civic life for over forty years, with deeper roots going back at least two centuries.

These forces were unleashed by an individualistic, hyper-liberal philosophy that has had catastrophic effects on our institutional and social relationships and our sense of belonging. The family, community and place have all been undermined. The most devastating impact has been on the economy, leading to the degradation of parts of our country.

It's what we call [the era of 'contract'](#). It has been hostile to human beings – and now it's unravelling. We are on the cusp of a very big change. The church needs to respond. And here is what all my conversations and encounters tell me about the right response. Our country needs a church that is:

- a gateway to the Holy Spirit
- and which understands and takes its place in society.

But my experience has shown me that the church is nowhere near what it could and should be, because the formation of so many Christians is deeply flawed. Too many of us

- have not had the experience of the Holy Spirit
- are unaware of the extent of the profound changes underway
- are unaware that our formation has not equipped us for this moment.

Of course, church leaders recognise that there is a problem. But many do not know what to do about it. The trajectory of decline in parts of the church is driving them to throw the kitchen sink at the latest project, perhaps evangelism, maybe social action. The result is that many Christians, including leaders, are overwhelmed and exhausted by the latest programme or outreach initiative.

Something much deeper is needed. The gifts are present in the churches, but they are fragmented.

We need to be open to what works and stop being tribal. Our discipleship formation for the new era should draw on gifts from across the churches.

For example:

- the Pentecostal trust in the primacy of God
- the charismatic experience of the Holy Spirit
- the born again relationship with Jesus
- the Anglican and Free church commitment to place
- the evangelical passion for Scripture
- the Orthodox conception of sacred cosmology
- the neighbourhood church sense of family
- the contemplatives' discipline and stillness
- the prophetic gift for reading the signs of the times.
- And of course, Catholic social thought, for its way of reading the world, to uphold the integrity of the human person and to understand the forces we are up against.

Catholic social thought is a body of thinking that is rooted in the gospel, generated by deep theological discernment and informed by the learned experience of the church in every nation over a hundred and thirty years, building on centuries of tradition and natural law.

Sometimes called the theology of the Holy Spirit in practice, it is a gift to all people of goodwill, not only to Catholics. It helps us understand how political and philosophical ideas and policies can affect the human person, and to recognise when social systems and cultural values are dehumanising. It helps us to be politically literate in a way that is aligned with our faith, and to avoid the risk of mission drift and the corrosive influence of modernism and post-modernism.

In particular, this social teaching teaches that neither human beings nor nature should be commodified and that capital has a tendency to do exactly that: to turn people and everything in the created world into commodities. Any formation that neglects to recognise the demonic power of capital will take us in the wrong direction. It won't work if we don't understand the powers at work.

But Catholic social thought is not an anti-capitalist ideology. Rather, it transcends left and right. It seeks to achieve a balance of interests between capital and the human being. Capital can be creative and that creativity should be encouraged. But capital can easily become anti-human, and that capacity must be constrained.

Neither is it a pro- or anti-state ideology. It calls out state systems when they oppress or dehumanise, when they usurp the autonomy of the family or undermine democracy. Catholic social thought encourages distribution of power through local institutions and critiques the administrative state when it is overcentralised.

There are three kinds of power: money power, state power and relational power, which is the power that people generate by relating together. The churches must be at the heart of creating that relational power, in order to resist the dominance of money power and state power, so as to uphold the human space. And this must be at the heart of the new formation. The renewal of relationships will lead to a new [politics of grace](#), to a new settlement for the common good.

But the pernicious individualism of the modern world has infected the church. The experience of most Christians is still in the consumerist model – of going to church, getting something and going home again. All too often, the Christian life is not taking place within a fellowship of mutual love and support.

Here is an example. A woman told me she had been struggling with terrible debt for two years. She had gone to church every week but hadn't told a soul. Why didn't that church have a culture where she was known, where she could be real, loved and supported? And are our churches ready to welcome an ex-offender and his family?

To develop relational power, we need to become a relational church. That requires reframing our conception of 'church' as more than a local institution, more than a place of worship. It is to conceive of church as a group of faithful people committed to a place.

We need to become communities of place, to be outward facing, living in loving friendship with others in the neighbourhood, with a commitment to civic friendship – especially in places that have been abandoned, both economically and spiritually.

We need to move from 'contract' to 'covenant'.

The truth is that the church itself is vulnerable and in need of friendship. For evangelisation and social action to be meaningful, the church needs to recognise that it too needs help.

It is no longer really viable for the local church to think of itself as 'host'. It has to be more like a 'neighbour', a neighbour who:

- is the gateway to an encounter with the Holy Spirit
- is distinctively and confidently Christian
- is not subordinated to secular agendas
- is outward facing, able and ready to play a full and active role in civil society.

Relationship with place is central to this new formation. To be with our neighbours, we must be at home together. But the truth of church decline is that it has fallen out of relationship with large parts of the population. It is no longer the object of affection, it doesn't speak people's language, and often it appears embarrassed about God.

In particular, too much of the church suffers from middle-class dominance. The class issue in the church reflects similar issues in our politics. When we welcome diversity, we need to include class. Otherwise, we will draw the wrong conclusions. When we hear Pope Francis call for a poor church for and of the poor, we must remember that the poor are not only the destitute. They include working class communities, which include all ethnicities and political opinions.

Pope Francis is right when he says it is necessary to let ourselves be evangelized by the poor. To do that, we need to build a shared life, to promote and build a common good between people and to resist the temptation to dominate the space.

Along with a relationship with place, a recognition of people must be part of the new formation. This means the church must be able not just to give, but to receive. We're not on safari – this is not missionary work at arm's length. The new formation means evangelisation needs to be holistic – less proselytising and providing, and more engaging the whole of our lives: being real with our neighbours, being honest and vulnerable.

Christians are called to be their embodied selves acting in the world, to be the embodiment of love in a desecrated world. The covenantal promise of a local church and its leaders requires accompanying people and staying for the long term. It means walking with neighbours in shared grief and in the trauma and the struggle of everyday life.

The right position for the new formation – commitment to place, solidarity with poor people, the covenantal embodiment of love – is incompatible with the service provider posture that many churches have come to adopt. We can no longer be the patrician church ‘giving to the poor’, or running social action franchises if there is no reciprocity. Working class communities have much to teach the church and the dynamic of service-client is often perceived as a separation between ‘us’ from ‘them’. What is needed is mutuality, solidarity, respect and genuine loving friendship. Justice flows from love, not the other way round.

There are profound changes going on in the church. Parts are dying, and Covid has accelerated this trend. But I am not among those who are panicking.

I am convinced that the Holy Spirit is at work in the church, bringing energy and new things. To make room for the Spirit to make things new, the formation of church leadership must include the skill of letting go of old things. We need to understand how to be undertaker as well as midwife. To learn that, we need to be attentive to the Spirit. This receptivity has been missing from the formation of large parts of the church.

People need to be introduced to prayer, to what being in relationship with God is really like. The vast majority of our population have absolutely no idea. This can be taught. It’s not rocket science. It is done so well in brilliant tools like the Alpha course. I don’t mind admitting that I was prejudiced against the course before I did it. Now I recommend it to churches that aren’t growing.

The cell group, which is central to Alpha, is a key component of the new formation. People need to be on a journey together, to see where the Spirit is leading them, to be in regular nurturing conversations with others who can spot what is happening. People can navigate life together, be accountable to each other, engage deeply with scripture together, talk about what matters to them.

In the new formation, we should always be asking the question: “Lord what are you asking of us?”

My own journey of discipleship and vocation has been most profound in the small group setting, and particularly during the pandemic. I am blessed to be in groups where we travel together, where we are able to be real with each other. It is through our brokenness that the light gets in.

We must learn to discern the work of the Spirit and be open to surprise. The new things may not fit our own spirituality or practices. I am seeing this all the time, I’m sure you are too.

So the new formation needs to cultivate leaders with generous hearts, people who can become attuned to new energy and to nurture it. If we do this, new vocations will emerge. What it does not need is more glamorous or ‘professionalised’ leadership. It does not need more leaders, ordained or non-ordained, who are concerned with career, management and administration. It needs a ministry devoted to accompaniment, loving, listening, and staying.

The Holy Spirit is disrupting the church. How much is the church missing while it is not in relationship with people? It really is that simple. Get out more, walk the parish, meet with neighbours on a regular basis. Get to know each other. Receive as well as give.

We need a holistic evangelisation, not a narrow understanding restricted to proselytising. We need groups of faithful people journeying together who have a commitment to people and place. The local is where change will happen.

To restore the soul of the nation the formation of the people of God needs to be grounded in an accurate understanding of what is going on, and an openness to the Spirit.

The work of the local church then, is to

- keep alive and strengthen the human space that builds a relational power that can resist the dehumanising forces at work in the world, and
- act as a gateway to the Spirit.

The new discipleship formation needs to draw on the gifts of the whole people of God. To accompany people as they are called in their daily lives. To recognise their gifts and skills that God wants to bring into His mission, to bring people into the reality of His great creative participation.

that they may all be one.... that the world may believe that you have sent me.

John 17:21

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