

Discipleship and formation - what can we learn from each other?

This is a short talk delivered on 17 November 2021, for the Discipleship and Formation stream at the Learning to be Missionary Disciples Conference, Churches Together England 2021.

Brief for 12 minute talk: "Tell us a story or reflect on an incident, challenge or concern as well as bringing in some theological reflection. Consider how what you share might relate to the wider issue of unity as we seek to find points of commonality, to gain greater wisdom and insight from one another. Pope Francis reminds us that our differences can be expressed and polished until we reach, if not consensus, a harmony that holds on to the sharp notes of its difference."

I have a confession. I only put down these thoughts on the train, so please take this as a sketch.

I spend my life listening and learning across the churches - my typical week includes conversations with friends who are church planters, Pentecostal, prophetic, charismatic, men and women from religious orders, Evangelical, Free Church, Catholic, Anglican - across the liberal and conservative spectrum, and across political and cultural backgrounds. I am also influenced by the Jewish tradition, and I value my relationships with non-religious friends in civil society, business and politics.

I soak it all up and it filters through to our work.

This last couple of years has exposed some hard realities hasn't it. Hard truths for many of us personally, for our society, and of course about the church.

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 over two hundred years.

These forces are the consequences of an individualistic, hyper-liberal philosophy that has had catastrophic effects on our institutional and social relationships and our sense of belonging.

Alienation, nihilism, loneliness are symptoms of this - trends which long pre-date the pandemic - what is going on is not caused by the Coronavirus.

These forces have undermined the family, community and place.

The most devastating impact has been on the economy, leading to the degradation of parts of our country, places where people have lived for generations.

It's what we call the era of 'contract'. It's been hostile to human beings, and it's unravelling.

It's coming to an end and we are on the cusp of a very big change.

At such a time as this - our country really needs a church that is

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

But - I know I am not alone in this - the church is nowhere near what it could be.

Many Christians have had a flawed formation:

- they have not had the experience of the Holy Spirit
- they are unaware of the extent of the profound changes underway
- they are unaware that their formation has not equipped them for this moment

The trajectory of decline in parts of the church is driving leaders to throw the kitchen sink at evangelism, social action, the latest project - but something much deeper is needed.

Many Christian leaders are overwhelmed and exhausted by the latest programme or outreach initiative.

To discern the components of the new formation, I draw on the gifts of all the churches. For example:

- trusting in the primacy of God from the Pentecostals
- knowing the Holy Spirit from the charismatics
- commitment to place from Anglicans and Free churches
- the sense of family from the evangelicals
- reading the signs from the prophetics.

We need to be open to what works and stop being tribal.

I also draw on Catholic social thought - a body of thinking 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.

It is a gift to all people of goodwill, not only for Catholics. It helps us look at how political and philosophical ideas and policies can affect the human person, and where systems are dehumanising.

It helps us be politically literate in a way that is aligned with our faith, that helps us avoid the risk of mission drift and the corrosive influence of post modernism.

It helps us recognise that human beings and nature must not be commodified, and to understand the tendency that capital has to commodify.

Any formation that neglects to recognise the demonic power of capital will take us in the wrong direction. Our efforts will fail if we don't understand the powers at work.

But Catholic social thought is not anti-capitalist, it transcends left and right.

It seeks to achieve a balance of interests between capital and the human being.

Capital is creative but must be constrained.

There are three kinds of power:

- 1) money power
- 2) state power

3) relational power - the power that people generate by relating together.

The churches must be at the heart of creating that relational power.

This must be at the heart of the new formation.

The renewal of relationships will lead to a politics of grace, to a new settlement for the common good.

But that individualism has infected the church too.

It is amazing to me that the experience of most Christians is still in the consumerist model of going to church, getting something and going home again.

A woman told me she had been struggling with terrible debt for two years, going 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?

We need to become a relational church.

The conception of 'church' needs reframing - not only as local institutions, but understood as groups of faithful people.

We need to become communities of place, to be outward facing, living in loving friendship with others in the neighbourhood, with a commitment to place and 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 in need of friendship, no longer really viable to call itself 'host' but now more like 'neighbour', it must be

- one who is the gateway to an encounter with the Holy Spirit, and
- be distinctively and confidently Christian, not subordinated to secular agendas
- but also a church that is outward facing, able to act as a civic neighbour

So relationship with place is central.

To live with our neighbours - this must be part of the new formation.

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, it has suffered from middle class dominance.

This is a class issue.

In the church, and it reflects similar issues in our politics.

So when we hear the term a poor church for and of the poor, we must be brave enough to think about class.

When we think of the poor we need to think not just of the destitute, but of the working class - remembering that the working class crosses all ethnicities and opinions.

Our understanding of diversity needs to include class or we will get to the wrong conclusions.

Pope Francis says that it is necessary that we let ourselves be evangelized by the poor.

We need to be building a shared life, to build a common good between people and to resist attempts to dominate the space.

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.

In the new era we need a formation characterised by a holistic understanding of evangelisation - engaging the whole of our lives, rather than just proselytising - a narrow interpretation.

We need:

To be real with each other, honest and vulnerable.

To be our embodied selves acting in the world.

To be the embodiment of love in a desecrated world.

Where the covenantal promise of a local church and its leaders means accompanying people and staying for the long term. It means walking with neighbours in tenderness and love, in shared grief and in the trauma and the struggle of everyday life.

This reveals a problem with the service provider posture that many churches have adopted.

The benevolent church 'giving to the poor', or running social action franchises needs to be adjusted - because that is still perceived as 'them' and 'us' by the working class.

What is needed is genuine loving friendship - and from *this* justice flows, 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 the Holy Spirit at work.

There is energy in new things coming.

The formation of church leadership must include the skill of letting go.

We need to understand how to be both undertaker *and* midwife.

To be attentive, to listen to the Spirit - this posture has been missing from the formation of large parts of the church.

People need to be introduced to prayer, what being in relationship with God is like - the vast majority of our population have absolutely no idea.

It's not rocket science and is done so well in brilliant tools like Alpha. I don't mind admitting that before I did the course I was one of those who was prejudiced against it but I now recommend it to churches that aren't growing.

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

If we do this, new vocations will emerge.

So the new formation critically needs to equip leaders to become attuned to new energy and to nurture it.

To discern the work of the Spirit - to 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.

It calls for an unglamorous less 'professionalised' leadership, concerned less with career, management or administration, rather 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 our neighbours on a regular basis. Get to know each other.

We need a holistic evangelism, not a narrow understanding restricted to proselytising.

We need 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 is to

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

The new formation needs 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.

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