

Renewal and the Church

10 years ago, I had a prompting of the spirit. I saw our society was in trouble. That trust was breaking down. I felt called to explore how the church could be part of the solution. Since then it has been my vocation, and others have joined me. We need to understand what's been going on.

40 years of extreme individualism have taken their toll. The dominance of the market and the state has eroded our common life together, led to inequality, loneliness, crisis of meaning and a breakdown in social trust. The pandemic has accelerated and intensified these trends.

But there is an antidote to individualism - the common good. The common good is this shared life of a society in which everyone can flourish by working together, each taking responsibility. It's not a utopian ideal, and it rejects identity politics. We build the common good by acting together across our differences.

Churches devote huge resources to picking up the pieces, but unless we address the causes, our efforts will be like sticking plasters. Our fractured nation needs our help. We can overcome individualism by building the common good. Together for the Common Good helps churches and schools play their part.

As Christians, we know we're members of one body. We're called to live, as Jesus did, in friendship - across class, income, ethnicity and educational background. We're to be non-tribal, build bridges, break out of our echo chambers and to act in solidarity with our fellow citizens.

God is calling the church to be relational. Our model is the Trinity - to live in relationship with God and with each other. So relationships come first. Genuine loving relationships of reciprocity and mutual respect. We're all called to play our part. A relational church.

But the culture of individualism has infected the churches, too. There has been mission drift. Some have become inwardly focused. Others have allowed social action to drive their purpose. Others adopt managerial practises, the language of marketing, or are captured by a secular agenda.

This drift has caused the church to lose touch with its sacred civic role. It has fallen out of relationship with ordinary people. The vocation of the local church relates to everyone in the neighbourhood, not only its own congregation and those in need. If it's not in relationship with its neighbours, it can't act in genuine solidarity.

Many churches are facing rapid decline. In a bid for survival, some are attempting to justify their existence by their usefulness to the state. But God is transforming the church. We're called to be more than an NGO. We're being called into a new role that is also ancient. To be a good neighbour.

Instinctively, people feel things aren't right. There's a yearning for change. Individualism has made our life transactional. Its culture of contract degrades human beings and the natural world. But deep in the memory of the church is a different vision. A story of covenant.

Covenantal relationships form part of the antidote to contract. Renewal comes as we build durable relationships of commitment, meaning and belonging as we become communities of place. A humble church, restoring its relationship with the neighbourhood. Together for the Common Good helps churches do this.

Rather than rush to a project or social action, it's necessary to listen - to listen to what God is already doing in the neighbourhood. The congregation must first discern how they are called in their particular place. Then set about building and strengthening local relationships. It is through those relationships that they will make a meaningful contribution to civic renewal.

Our principles, rooted in Scripture, guard against mission drift. The common good, the human person, dignity, equality, respect for life, the dignity of work, social relationships, participation, reconciliation, solidarity, subsidiarity, stewardship on everyone is included, no one is left behind.

We encourage churches to build covenantal relationships with local institutions like clubs, businesses, schools, associations, community groups and so on. To build a relational power to strengthen civil society, in order to resist the dehumanising tendencies of the market and the state.

As this new era of instability unfolds, we all feel a sense of confusion and uncertainty. And the church is vulnerable, diminished. The church is in need of friendship too. To build relationships of love and reciprocity, it must share its vulnerability. No longer the patrician church acting as host, but as neighbour - able to receive as well as give.

In the new era, many churches are struggling to adapt. Especially those who've fallen out of relationship with ordinary people. Church leaders face a threefold crisis. Financial, vocational, theological. But God is at work, breaking down in some areas while building up in others.

The spirit is working to bring us into relationship with our neighbours, building trust across denominations, and alliances with fellow faith communities and non-religious friends. There's much we can do together if we organise ourselves. Building relationship is our insurgency against individualism.

We're called to be salt and light, integrating the personal and social gospel, re-weaving the places where we live, not as service providers, but living alongsiders, in loving friendship, from the grass roots to the boardroom. Building just, covenantal relationships in solidarity with our neighbours.

Our society is in trouble. Our common life is further fragmenting. But the wind of the spirit is moving. You and I, the whole people of God - ordained and non-ordained - are called to become embedded in the local and to build common good with our neighbours. This is the nature of the radical renewal to which God is drawing us.

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