Analysis Of Fresh Expressions Of Church

New forms of Church (Fresh Expressions) have been appearing all over the global North for a number of years. In an attempt to connect to today's consumerist, post-modern culture they seek to reach out to the unchurched and de-churched in new and fresh ways. In this essay I will discuss how these new forms of Church can engage with communities who live in this consumerist culture. I will look at how the church can be relevant today but stay true to the discipleship of Jesus and the history of the church and its traditions and how we can disciple a new generation in this individualist culture. I will also discuss how the fresh expression movement has had implications for my own context.

Consumerist culture today is cited around consumption, we consume to make ourselves viable. We have moved from a society of progress through hard work and education to a society of choice. A world view of being able to have whatever we want, whenever we want it; thus, religion has become a matter of culture rather than choice. The absolute truth of the gospel does not fit in with a culture that is post-modernity, there is no one universal truth, people pick and choose what they want to believe rather like shopping and purchasing items.

In this post-modern culture how can the mission of God through the church reach out to a society that believes itself to be self-satisfied with life without the gospel? As culture becomes more commercial, it will not always be obvious in what form mission should take. How mission has taken place in past generations may be unsuitable for this current generation.

Whatever form mission takes we must recognise that the mission of the church comes from the mission of God – missio Dei. This is God's mission for the world, as the church we join in with God both prayerfully and theologically. It is not our own mission as a church, we must discern and see where God is working, learn what He is doing, and work with Him. As Nussbaum puts it, "mission is not primarily an activity of the church but an attribute of God. God is a missionary God……Mission is thereby seen as a movement from God to the world; the church is viewed as an instrument for that mission…To participate in mission is to participate in the movement of God's love toward people".

St Paul was not immune to the difficulties of mission in a different culture to his own. His mission strategy in Athens was one of looking, listening, and discerning through the Spirit what was happening and why. He then demonstrated this approach effectively through his sermon on Mars Hill. He took time to discuss philosophy and cited Greek poetry to leverage his knowledge of Greek culture so that he related to his audience but through this was still able to proclaim the gospel of Jesus. However, he was astute enough not to allow himself to be confused with a Greek philosopher but to elevate the message of Christ above any sort of compromise. He spent time with people and formed relationships which made his converts more open to hearing the gospel. I believe that this would be a good strategy for the church today, to be rooted in their foundations but open enough to meet people in their own beliefs and structures.

Every culture we encounter as Christians will have its challenges; In his book Rediscovering Christianity, Vincent Donovan charts the difficulties he came through to reach the Masai tribe with the gospel. He noted that the 19th Century system of buying up slaves to christianize them

on the mission plants led to nothing more than “an inward turned individual salvation orientated unadopted Christianity… “ Moving into the 1960’s saw missionaries initiating building projects and serving the communities. These projects helped to play an important part in building up the nation. Social justice now came to the forefront of the missionary aims.

But it became clear to Donovan that it was not simply enough to be part of community building projects. Whilst these were helpful to the community, bringing acts of loving service to their needs, there was no talk of God, no conversation about the hope that mankind has in the death and resurrection of Jesus. Going in directly to the Masai tribe and embracing and respecting their culture whilst talking directly about a God who provided not only salvation but also hope, had a much more influential mark on mission in East Africa. Approaching our culture today with respect to its ways, reading the signs of the times and embracing communities rather than individuals may help in our engagement in our post-modern society.

There is, however, a broad difference in the culture today to that of the Masai tribe. In 2003 The Mission Shaped Church research was published. It noted that we live in a culture of “Fragmented Lives” and living in a network society. There is no longer one community but a network of people and families living separated and individual lives. Much of society has turned its back on togetherness and instead strives for a culture that must fit with their own individual lifestyle. The Mission Shaped Church research noted that” The communities of the global age generally have no local centre. People living in the same street will have fleeting relationships with each other, having widely differing lifestyles and household arrangements.” Given this vast change in our society over the last hundred years the church must find a way of meeting people where they are in the culture that they have been brought up in. Recognising that we now live in a more individualistic culture, the churches challenge is to reignite the need for community. Cell groups and new monastic communities are just two ways that this could be achieved.

It is in this context that the church is shaped by the culture we live in. One paradigm of mission theology that is emerging is that of inculturation: a dealing with the local culture as an integrated whole. The challenge of this paradigm is to ensure that the gospel is revealed through Holy Scripture and creeds, the church engaging in its mission with its own culture and history and the culture within which the gospel is being shared. The purpose of inculturation is to allow the gospel to transform the culture from within, in this transformation there will need to be a common ground found to begin sharing the gospel rather than expecting the modern culture to change its ways.

It is now clear that the church no longer holds a special place in the heart of society. It will need to adapt with the times and become reformulated where needed, constantly moving as culture moves. There is a suggestion from Karl Rahner that the church will need to “strip away all the cultural accretions that it has accumulated over the years so that it can be the beginning of a creative tomorrow.” However, we must be careful in our stripping of any accretions that we do not neglect the sacred tradition on which the church stands. New forms of church must be able to be relevant enough to engage with the unreached communities but in doing so there may be a sense that the church potentially modernises Jesus to fit with the culture of today. Whatever new form the church might take it needs to guard against syncretism by making sure it models the apostolic nature of Christ. There is a tension that must be held that links the definitive original message of the mission of the apostles and the tasks of the church today. This ensures that there is equal weight on the future of the direction of the church and its authorized past. Nussbaum sums this up by saying “in the field of religion a paradigm shift always means both

continuity and change, both faithfulness to the past and boldness to engage the future, both constancy and contingency, both tradition and transformation."

The church cannot be blind in these times, it is important that as new forms of church are discussed and thought about that there is an awareness of what is happening in our communities. Where have people come from? What do they believe in and why have beliefs so radically changed from the past? These changes and behaviours will continue to change over time. The church needs to be equipped with leaders who are constantly asking the question how do we meet people in this environment of an ever changing society. Kirk summarises that when we keep reflecting and questioning, 'we present the good news of the gospel as a surprising message of grace, liberation and hope to each generation.' The truth of the gospel cannot be watered down to fit this commercial culture, its message needs to stand strong amidst the many distractions of this world.

Discipling this generation will not be an easy task. The principles of disciple making are not bound by time or culture but are tools to shape the kingdom of God. Disciples are made by the example that they are set. In an age of consumerism, the church needs to stand in the middle of the community demonstrating the model of Jesus to their culture. Loving acts of service, listening ears, actions to combat injustice and oppression and concrete teaching of the gospel are all marks of how we as a church should be modelling the leadership of Jesus. As a church we demonstrate a transformed life through our everyday conduct rather than a fixed pattern of religious practice. We need to demonstrate a threefold call to discipleship by following, witnessing, and serving. In this post-modern culture these three disciplines which wrap themselves into the five marks of mission, will be the example of kingdom living to those who seek transformation in their own lives.

It is clear in my own context that despite the decline in church attendance and engagement there is a community hunger for the gospel. However, the traditional form of Sunday church does not fit in with fast paced nature and busyness of the parish. For some time now we have been honestly reflecting on how we engage with the people in our community where they are. There has been a definite shift in thinking about how we develop a "we'll come to you" approach to mission rather than waiting for the community to come to us. Community impact days, carol singing in the local pubs and prayer walking in the parish streets are a start in us becoming a more outward focused church, reminding us continually that church is for the outsiders and the gospel needs to be heard in our streets. In addition, a change in the leadership of the church has brought fresh energy into the parish, and we have become much more aware that even as a beacon in the community we cannot expect people to always come to us.

One of the greatest challenges for our community is how we connect and engage with our youth. Employment of a shared youth worker has helped in reaching out to the youth of the community but has not yet seen substantial growth. The lack of any youth facility/club has contributed to the lack of growth. Perhaps now more than ever, with issues of mental health in young people, we should be investing in a place that our young people can go to and feel listened to and valued as well as hearing the gospel message.

In contrast our work with baptism families and a new way of doing church for the under-five's has had a significant amount of success. Growth at 4 0 clock church is substantial and the families who come identify this service as their way of church. Our challenge now for this new

form of church is to disciple these families so that we meet the four marks of church, Up, In, Out, Of. Over time this style of church has proven to be centripetal where we have drawn people in and also centrifugal, as we help out well established families to nurture their faith and equip them to take mission out from the centre of church back into the community.

There is one other major challenge that currently faces our church. The state of our buildings is currently not fit for the purpose of our mission vision. To engage with people, we need viable and flexible buildings to meet people's needs. Currently this does not exist, and it will take skilled and strong leadership, difficult decision making and discernment through the Spirit to implement a space where we can pioneer mission.

As a church we will continue to engage with reflective practice and strategic planning against the five marks of mission so that we become holistically focussed on our mission to this culture.

I am in no doubt that we are moving into a new era of church and engagement with this current culture. Amongst all the challenges that the future may hold the church will need to embody its place in consumerism but will also need to strive to challenge the consumerist pattern of the world. There will need to be a creative tension to being relative to today's culture but holding true to the original message of the gospel and the foundations on which the church stands. New forms of church would do well to take on part of Paul's strategy where deep listening, attentive looking and an adaption to the cultural needs of the community are implemented. Post-modern culture is ever changing, what has worked in the past as regards mission will need to be revaluated and rethought as we continue to witness to new generations. New forms of church will need to discern God's voice and actions through missio Dei, working alongside him as the community of God's kingdom. By joining with God in his mission to the world, the church can become immersed to share and proclaim the gospel in this culture rather than at it. The continuous goal for the church today will be to see transformation and the gospel heard in a direct way to all.