

Church Planting – an article for the Church Times

I attend an Anglican Church plant, I planted a new Anglican church in Huddersfield, I am mentoring an Anglican Church planter, I am involved in helping to develop a Diocesan church planting strategy and I am teaching ordinands to plant fresh expressions of church. You could say much of my life revolves around church planting!

I find the issue of Church planting often produces a strange mixture of emotions. There are the caricatures. The planter with the grace of a Jose Mourinho, the threatened incumbent with the mentality of a General Custer or the Diocesan officials who move things on with the speed of a Sir Humphrey Appleby on a bad day.

There are the examples of where it went wrong. We all know the stories where for a variety of reasons things did not work out well. And the danger is that in the retelling these occasional occurrences become the norm.

There is fear. The new Dioceses Pastoral and Missions Measure has certainly caused consternation about what these Bishop Mission Orders may mean for clergy and their parishes.

But I have to say from all my experience Church planting is not the pariah nor the predator of the church. It takes us to a place of real hope as we look into an uncertain future.

Please remember

1. **This is not new.** Many of the churches that we think have been around since the beginning are actually church plants. The parish church I served in Huddersfield had been planted by Dewsbury Minster during the Middle Ages. Many of the large Anglican churches here in Cambridge were themselves plants within the last 100 years. Martyn Percy in *The Future of the Parish System* clearly shows how the idea of a parish church has never been a static concept and has developed and changed over its history.
2. **This is new.** No this is not a contradiction. We urgently need to respond to the needs of a dramatically changed and diverse mission context. We are not talking about redistributing our existing church members but creating churches that engage with their local social context. We discovered that 53% of people in Huddersfield had no contact with any religious institution. In planting a church, it was those people we had in mind, not taking people from the various parish churches. I remember speaking to the Methodist superintendent whose first question to me was, 'Are you going to be a predatory church?' In fact we made a promise to local churches we would not take people from their churches and on a number of occasions I sent people back to the churches they had come from.

Also under the Prescott plan the massive house building has created new towns, areas and enlarged villages with no churches to serve them. In my Diocese the new town of Cambourne has seen a very successful LEP church planted led by a Church of Scotland minister.

3. **This is happening well.** When we talk about church planting we often have the classic image of a large church planting a congregation into an ailing parish church. But this is only **one** of a variety of church plants both within and outside parish boundaries. I have heard recently of youth cells planted across an Archdeaconry in Ripon and Leeds Diocese or a congregation planted in a Doctors surgery in Nottingham. Last week I visited a fantastic new congregation planted at the back of a church in rural Cambridgeshire which met on a Thursday night. It was the vision of an NSM and 4 lay people, all in their 50's and was one of the best and most creative services I have seen in a long time. The fresh expression agenda has helped us in seeing that there is more than one model of church planting. You don't need a big congregation, a building or lots of money to plant something new.
4. **This is official.** In many places this is being supported and encouraged by the Diocese itself. I noticed recently that Oxford Diocese said that, 'in some areas mission strategy may need to cross parish, deanery and archdeaconry boundaries. In Monmouth Diocese's strategy for growth they suggest, 'see if you can plant another church.' Dioceses are grappling with what it means to be mission shaped as well as parishes and congregations.
5. **This is healthy.** Church plants give space for experiment and creativity and they are often the best places to reach the unchurched. But they also create places to develop our theology as we ask questions about mission or what it means to 'be church.' They do not take energy from what already is present and they do contribute to the whole.
6. **We all need grace.** This whole process needs consultation and partnership. I found in planting a church that good clear communication was essential. But I also found a wonderfully generous and helpful clergy who were not out to wreck anything new. But brothers and sisters who wanted to see God's mission developing and growing.

Of course there is some nervousness about the Bishops Mission Orders. These orders enable any person to request a Bishop to establish a mission initiative or the Bishop could decide to promote something himself. The key test is that these initiatives would be fostering or developing a form of Christian community. There are also inbuilt accountability structures including Bishop's visitors and a five year limit to any one order. I don't think these Orders will enable an ecclesiastical free for all or put power hungry Bishops in control. But they will give us far more flexibility in developing new forms of church in workplaces, pubs or shops, make it quicker and easier to get things started and enable there to be some kind of Diocesan strategy. The Orders will also help with issues of funding, housing etc. This legislation, due in 2008, should properly legitimise experimentation but also make churches duly accountable. Hopefully such legislation will control the few mavericks and encourage the majority who want to do new things, but to do it in proper order and with consultation.

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