
A table of contents for *Anvil* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_anvil_01.php

Anglican Church Planting - Where is the problem?

IAN BUNTING

ABSTRACT
Church planting is certainly in vogue in the Church of England. Ian Bunting provides a New Testament background to the practise, and, in an overview of current trends, divides them into developmental, alternative and revolutionary forms. For him, Anglican church planting should be both loyal to its traditions and trinitarian in character, by which he means that there should be rootedness in local community, social openness, and a resistance to religious fashion.

THERE is a problem with some modern forms of Anglican church planting, especially those which cross traditional boundaries. They threaten the pattern of mission which the church has inherited from the past. This had a territorial dimension. Anglicans understand about territory from the parish system which they have employed ever since the earliest days of the Roman mission in England (AD 597). The Anglican church has spread through adapting a Roman secular strategy of dividing the land up into convenient administrative parcels. For all its advantages in terms of establishing a local church presence in the locality where people live, in a radically different context the disadvantages now outweigh the surviving benefits. Anglicans planting churches today, have had to reassess both the reasons for doing so, and where to do it. They have been reconsidering what Anglicans mean when they speak of the church, and what are the appropriate methods for sustaining its life and furthering its mission.

Some look back to the church of the first century which was distinctive and marked by a spirit of love. They say that the rot set in with what Reinhold Niebuhr called 'the unhappy conversion of Constantine'[1] and the decision (AD 312) to make Christianity the official religion of the Roman empire. This sounded the death knell for the early Christian hope that the spirit of love which first inspired their communities would soon infuse the whole world. There is no doubt that the congregations, as we read of them in St Paul's writings, were marked by strong features which gave them a clear identity within the surrounding cultures. The members interacted with each other in a relationship of mutual dependence. Their unique belief in Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord gave them a coherent world view which set them apart in the religious world of their day. Their moral behaviour, in terms of practical daily living, distinguished them both from their neighbours and the standards

1 Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society (1932)*, SCM, London 1963, p 72.

and values of the world about them. In short, the life of the early church glowed brightly in comparison with the structures, compromises, power struggles and corruption of what came to be called Christendom.

Others, however, accept the post-Constantinian compromise. They argue that the church has allowed sentimental idealism about the first Christians to overtake theological realism. With the spread and growing influence of the Christian church, it was inevitable and even desirable that the Christian church should enter into what John Habgood has called 'critical solidarity'[2] with those who held authority and called themselves Christian. Not only does the Bible consistently urge the church to pray for them, the Christian doctrine of the incarnation impels the church to become involved in every aspect of life, including the way society is ordered, or chooses to order itself. Historically, therefore, we find the English church before and after the Reformation closely linked to the secular power, including its administrative arrangements, but capable of criticising and resisting its authority. The growth of Anglican movements, expressions of what came to be known as the 'voluntary principle' both inside and outside the established church, provide evidence of a later acceptable independence. These formed at the same time communities of protest and renewal, the spirit of which is often found in Anglican church plants today.

In this article we shall look at the household context of the New Testament church alongside some contemporary views on 'community'. The history of three classic 'types' of church, identified by Ernst Troeltsch at the beginning of the century, will then lead into a review of recent Anglican church planting in its developmental, alternative and revolutionary forms.

Finally, I argue, emerging church plants today will have to reflect the God in whom Anglicans believe.

New Testament congregations and the household of God

In reviewing the formation of the church in New Testament times, Wayne Meeks identified the emerging congregations with what modern sociologists call 'groups'. However, there are some striking differences when churches in the first century are compared with typical groups within the communities in which they were set. The most obvious difference is the way the local congregations, for all their close-knit relationships, saw themselves as part of something larger, comprehensive, global, and ultimately universal in scope.[3] So, for example, although Christian groups met in private houses, as a Christian congregation the household was opened beyond the extended

2 John Habgood, 'Church and Society', in ed. Ian Bunting, *Celebrating the Anglican Way*, Hodder and Stoughton, London 1996, p 35. Jacques Ellul made the same point; 'The basic principles of Christianity contained Christendom as a logical conclusion.... But there is another truth of basic importance: the Incarnation; and the Incarnation requires that principles be put into practice. A Christian cannot stop at declarations of intention'. Jacques Ellul, *The New Demons*, Mowbrays, London 1975, p 15.

3 Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians*, 'The Social World of the Apostle Paul', Yale University Press, New Haven and London 1983, pp 74-110.

family to include new believers and others who chose to join them. In time, the whole church could be described as 'the household of God' (Ephesians 2.19). Meeks says, 'The centrality of the household has a further implication for the way we conceive of the Pauline mission: it shows our modern, individualistic conception of evangelism and conversion to be quite inappropriate'.[4] The early church did not grow by individual believers choosing to form themselves into purpose-built groups of like-minded Christians.

Some scholars have in the past suggested that the first Christian groups may have imitated the pattern of voluntary associations, synagogues, and philosophical or rhetorical schools. Meeks argues, however, that although there were some similarities with these groups, the household was the basic context in which the early congregations established themselves. He finds more evidence of this in the warm language of intimate relationship which Paul uses in addressing the congregations. Membership of a new community which broke the bounds of natural kinship was further symbolised in the rite of Baptism 'into one body' in which distinctions of gender, class and race were transcended because all are 'one in Christ' (Galatians 3.28). At the same time, as we noted above, the particular language, beliefs and behaviour of the members of the Christian groups also marked them out from their neighbours.

Membership of a local group which nevertheless has a global perspective inevitably raises the question of boundaries. On the one hand, the early Christians broke down those they considered an offence to the universal mission of Christ. Yet, on the other hand, they maintained those which they judged to be important if they were to be credible representatives of a new community, different from others about them. They were not to team up with unbelievers (2 Corinthians 6.14 REB), or the immoral (1 Corinthians 6.9-20). By the quality of their relationships, by their care for the poor and powerless, and above all by their worship of God, Christian story-telling, and evident life of faith they displayed the life of a 'community' with an internal coherence sufficient to commend itself to the unbiased observer.

Community and the Anglican church

In spite of the difficulties people have in defining 'community' today, the word continues to be useful to describe a group of people who have in common something they consider to be important. In recent years, two writers have each outlined three forms such a community may take and, in doing so, have given helpful definitions which speak for themselves. P. Willmott describes communities first as, the 'territorial' or 'place' community, secondly, the 'interest' community and, thirdly, the community of 'attachment' in which people interact, in 'spirit' or 'sentiment', with a shared sense of identity.[5] D. Lee and H. Newby offer a similar threefold definition. First, there is the community in a 'locality'. Secondly, there is the community which is a 'local social system'. Thirdly, there is a community with a deeper

4 Meeks, *The First Urban Christians*, p 77.

5 P. Willmott, *Social Networks, Informal Care and Public Policy*, Policy Studies Unit, London 1986, chapter 6.

commitment, marked by a shared sense of identity which they call a 'communion'.[6] It is for this third type of community, 'communion', that many are searching in an age which has given paramount importance to the virtue of individual choice. They recognise a loss of the sense of belonging. Will they find it in the Anglican church?

The Anglican church has traditionally pursued a mission policy rooted in the doctrine of the providence and presence of God. God is both 'the Maker, and Preserver of all things' (Article 1), and present in human life as demonstrated in the incarnation of the 'Son of God, which was made very Man' (Article 2). On this basis, Anglicans have looked for growth in the church which might be better described as 'natural' rather than 'exotic'. They have tried to move in harmony with the natural rhythms of the society in which they have found themselves. So, for example, Anglicans have always wanted to adapt the Christian message within the prevailing culture. If they have sometimes been critical and reforming, they have rarely wanted to be radical or revolutionary. Consequently, Anglicans now confront a dilemma when weighing the contemporary context of mission in the developed world against their inherited and preferred way of working. It is not surprising if some want to take more positive action by planting entirely new congregations which display more of the characteristics of the close knit community which Lee and Newby have described as a 'communion'.

Church types, 'communion' and the Anglican mission

It may help if we relate the idea of 'communion' to an influential analysis of the social setting of Christianity in the western world. At the beginning of the 20th century, Ernst Troeltsch outlined a lesson for the churches which Anglicans, understandably perhaps, have been particularly slow to learn. He was explaining the disintegration of the medieval idea of Christendom. It was the church-type of Christianity, of which the Anglican church is a classic example, which maintained this universal and all-embracing understanding of the Christian religion. The church-type is essentially conservative, accepts the secular order, determines culture insofar as it can, and dominates the masses. The sect-type, for example the independent groups which sprang out of the Reformation, began to appear alongside the church-type. Sects are small groups which have both a strong internal coherence and direct personal relationships, what Lee and Newby call 'communion'. Lacking the power to dominate, they are indifferent, tolerant or hostile to social institutions and the power brokers who maintain them. Whereas the church-type is a top-down movement, the sect-type is bottom-up[7]. Troeltsch went on to identify a third type with which the churches are becoming increasingly familiar, religious individualism, 'a religious individualism which has no external organisation',[8] and which can only draw likeminded people together

6 D. Lee and H. Newby, *The Problem of Sociology*, Hutchinson, London 1983, chapter 4.
7 Ernst Troeltsch, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches (1911)*, George Allen and Unwin, London 1931, vol. 1, p 331.
8 Troeltsch, *Social Teaching*, p 381.

in voluntary associations. He prophesied correctly that this type would have an increasingly significant role in the interplay between the church and sect types of Christianity.

For centuries, the rural parish with its village church, a classic church-type, has been the model and ideal context for Anglican mission and pastoral care. So much so that, in the words of an influential report on the rural church, we forget that 'Christian theology is intrinsically person-focused and group-located. Historically speaking too the church is an urban religion which in origin involved voluntary membership'.[9] For most of the 20th century the Anglican church has been trying to catch up with the harsh reality of its position, in the eyes of most, as one denomination among many others. Frequently, this has forced Anglicans into a defensive mode. They have become less assured in their mission to all and to each in the land. They have become more preoccupied with the maintenance and survival of the church. Although this has sometimes been relieved by bouts of evangelistic and other mission activities, the overall impression abroad is that the church is in retreat. In consequence, Anglicans are searching for a new style and purpose which will appeal to those who now expect to exercise their individual choice from what is on offer in the supermarket of religions in the modern world.

If Anglicans eventually surrender to this pressure to concede to religious individualism, they will have lost both their distinctiveness and the opportunity to contribute something quite characteristically Anglican within the partnership of all the Christian churches. This is not to suggest that Anglicans do not need to adapt, as they have always wanted, to changes in the prevailing cultural climate. They do. The planting of new Anglican congregations is one way forward, provided that the planted congregations meet two essential criteria; first, they are recognisably Anglican and, secondly, they bear the marks of the kind of 'communion' Christians have come to expect from the earliest days of the church. There is, however, a tension between them which we must now address.

What Troeltsch called a church-type of Christianity finds itself living in an age when religious individualism encourages people to form voluntary associations of like-minded Christians. At the same time, contemporary church-type Anglicans are recognising that the first Christian congregations, established in households, had the character of the sect-type-'communions'. Moreover, within a plural society in some respects similar to our own, these 'communions' proved remarkably effective missionary congregations. Further, if Anglicans still wish to pursue a strategy of mission underpinned by the doctrines of the providence and presence of God which they hold dear, it has comprehensive implications. How may they build small groups or communities which demonstrate the strength and vitality of the 'communion' and, at the same time, also set forward the good news of God's universal care for people both collectively and individually? Church planting has been one answer.

---

9 Douglas Davies, Charles Watkins, Michael Winter, *Church and Religion in Rural England*, T. & T. Clark, London 1991, p 284.

Church planting in the Church of England

There has been a history to Anglican church planting which has matched the prevailing social consciousness of the nation at different points in its history.

First, in what some people call the rural, pre-urban or pre-modern period, Anglicans built churches and mission halls in the places where people moved to live. This policy continued well after the end of the second world war and into the 1960s. I can remember, for instance, the 'Call to Build' campaign in Liverpool at that time. In many ways the more recent church planting movement, dating from about 1970, has been no more than an extension of the same parish based policy, except that there has been no money available to put up new buildings. In the eyes of some critics today, the church has not broken out of its inherited and inappropriate pattern of mission and ministry. For example, Nigel Scotland makes a trenchant criticism of the working party's report to the House of Bishops in 1994 called, *Breaking New Ground* ;[10]

> A more honest description of its contents would be "Entrenched in the Old Ground"! Like many other Anglican papers and documents, the report is weak because it asks no serious questions about the validity and appropriateness of existing patterns of ministry, ecclesiastical structures or mission strategies of the Church of England.[11]

But it is not the whole story because, *secondly*, some Anglicans have quite deliberately tried to break with old building-oriented and parish-centred strategies of mission. They have tried to establish church plants, both within parishes and sometimes through extended house groups in other parishes, which are similar but not identical to Troeltsch's sect-type, or Lee and Newby's 'communions'. Such church planters have not aimed primarily to extend the traditional parish based mission. Rather, they have developed an approach like those who pioneered the Base Ecclesial Communities in Latin America and other developing nations. The purpose has been to discover a new and alternative way of being church through establishing base communities. Leonardo Boff described them thus;

> a group, or complex of groups, of persons in which a primary, personal relationship of brotherly and sisterly communion obtains, and which lives the totality of the life of the church, as expressed in service, celebration and evangelization'. Maringa, Brazil 1972.[12]

Church plants of this sort live in a creative tension with the established church which promotes them, but they are subversive rather than revolutionary. If they are an attempt to meet the challenge of modernity to the traditional churches, they claim nevertheless to be natural offshoots of the parent plant not exotic replacements.

---

10 *Breaking New Ground*, 'Church Planting in the Church of England', Church House Publishing, London 1994.

11 ed. Nigel Scotland, *Recovering the Ground*, 'Towards Radical Church Planting for the Church of England', Kingdom Power Trust Publications, Chorleywood 1995, p 12.

12 Leonardo Boff, *Ecclesiogenesis*, Collins, London 1986, p 20.

Thirdly, there is no doubt that a post-modern age, as some describe the 1990s, the period in which we now live, has brought further opportunities, but also trying temptations to Anglican church planters. This is the day of voluntary associations. Church planters who can capture imaginations and meet people aware of spiritual needs are well placed to see growth. But, can Anglicans with integrity make their offering alongside others in the supermarket of religions? The question is a pressing one for Anglican church planters.

However we try to define post-modernity, it has certainly had a deep effect upon people's attitude to what they used to accept as the general truths, standards and values which called for their collective obedience and religious duty. Grace Davie has argued, however, that it is the nature of society which is changing as much as religiosity. One effect has been for religious activity to become a leisure pursuit, as sport and shopping have become leisure pursuits. As an almost inevitable consequence, religion has been forced to consider the consumer and adopt a consumption version of religion which is alien to the traditional Anglican way.[13] In a fragmented world, the modern supermarket of religions encourages people to make their choice and build an all-encompassing world view upon it.

> Or to put this in a different and perhaps more provocative way, the believer not so much rejects fragmentation as takes this to its logical conclusion; selecting one particular fragment of what is on offer and expanding this to form a complete world view. Taken to extremes this tendency results in a series of competing fundamentalisms, a feature of late capitalist development, though one that bewilders many of its commentators.[14]

A critique

In reflecting upon the changes in society and religious activity over the last forty years, we may therefore say that the church planting strategy of Anglicans has had to cope with these changing perceptions. The approach of Anglican church planters has passed successively through the three phases outlined above which we may for convenience describe as; developmental, alternative, and revolutionary. Each phase has had its strengths and weaknesses. Each phase has also had an explicit or implicit theological underpinning which is the critical ground upon which it must be judged.

1. To start with, the *developmental* mode of church planting lies at the heart of the report to the House of Bishops *Breaking New Ground* (1994). Anglican church planting is described as 'a supplementary strategy which enhances the essential thrust of the parish principle....'.[15] The report goes on to use horticultural models to define different types of acceptable Anglican church

13 Grace Davie, *Religion in Britain since 1945*, 'Believing without Belonging', Blackwell, Oxford 1994, chapter 10.
14 Davie, *Religion in Britain since 1945*, p 200.
15 *Breaking New Ground*, p vi.

plants. The thrust of the report and the types, however, is to create a model of the church as 'the reproductive community'. Building on the work of David Bosch and others, Barry Roche has questioned whether this shows an adequate biblical, historical or fundamental understanding of the church as mission.[16]

What we must admit, nevertheless, is that the developmental mode undoubtedly stands within the Anglican tradition, reflects a pastoral approach to evangelism, and resonates with Anglican doctrinal priorities. First, although Anglicans are often criticised for their parochialism, the parish system has given Anglicans a framework within which to pursue their mission with confidence. The mission is to each and to all who live within a discrete neighbourhood. The problem, as every Anglican must admit, is that in today's world, parish boundaries are anachronistic. If the parish system has any surviving value it can only be in the strategy of a mission to all which has underpinned it.

Secondly, Anglican mission has always aimed to come alongside people with the gospel in the natural rhythms of their lives. So, for example, Anglican worship has taught past generations to relate the seasons of the year to great Christian truths. At Christmas, we remember the light which shines in the darkness. At Easter, we celebrate the springtime of new life in Christ. Again, it has been characteristic of Anglicans, though not of course unique, to worship God at the start and the close of the day. One of the purpose of the Book of Common Prayer was to sanctify these critical daily moments of transition from night to day, and day to night. The same is again true of what we have come to describe prosaically as 'occasional offices' or 'rites of passage'. Births, marriages and deaths have been occasions where Anglican liturgies have enshrined the gospel. Nevertheless, where once the majority of the population felt they understood this mission and, whether or not they attended, felt the church was their own, now they are strangers to both rite and church, unless they choose voluntarily to make them their own.

Thirdly, Anglican theological priorities have centred around the providence and presence of God. Since the beginnings of English Christianity the openness of God has been important. The incarnation, God revealed in human life, has informed the mission of the church as Anglicans have proclaimed this good news. There has been a Christ-centred core to Anglican believing. But, to be Christ-centred has meant giving weight also to the death and resurrection of Christ with its radical gospel of new life in Christ. Inevitably, there has been a certain tension apparent in the desire on the one hand to preach the openness of God and on the other to challenge people with responding to the unique revelation of that same God in Jesus Christ. Anglicans have wanted to do both. Many see the Reformation as the time when Anglicans sharpened an evangelistic thrust which had been blunted in

16 Barry Roche, *Church Planting: The Story and Structure of three Anglican churches, with reference to the future of mission in the Church of England*, (unpublished thesis), Westminster College, Oxford 1993, pp 25ff.

the preceding centuries. Others claim that the same challenge faces the church today.

2. The model of church planting which I have described as *alternative*, stemming from the base community movement in the developing world, has proved congenial to some Anglicans. Roman Catholic in origin, it owed much of its success to the way it built on the cultural foundations of that church in Latin America. In other words, from a strong if increasingly threatened tradition it explored new ways of proclaiming the gospel and being church in an alternative way without surrendering the national, social and community commitment of the church in a Catholic culture.

Base communities have the strength of being small, locally rooted, engaged in the life of the community, and connected to the wider church through the bishop and diocese. In earlier and better days, before a conservative and reactionary movement set in, this meant that the bishop, in consultation with the base community leaders, was able to draw up a strategy which was owned and pursued by the diocese as a whole. So, for example, in the Diocese of São Paulo, Brazil, in the early 1980s Catholics worked within an agreed mission statement to a practical policy focused in the development of base communities.

For many reasons the model has not been easy to transpose into English culture. For one thing, the coherence of the liberation theology which informed the development of base communities was founded on the goal of liberation from political, social and economic oppression. More recently, liberation theologies have multiplied, even in Latin America, as people have recognised an ever widening range of perceived oppressions and Christians have gathered communities to work for many different freedoms. Anglicans in the 20th century have not been able to assume the acceptance of a predominantly Anglican culture. Nor have they felt at ease about forming issue-based homogeneous groups, communities or churches which seem in their presuppositions to contradict a theological commitment to the providence and presence of an open and accessible God. The theological motif of the prophet of the kingdom of God which has sustained the liberationist approach, worked out through base communities, almost requires a dominant religious culture against which to protest. Such is not now the case. In multi-cultural and multi-ethnic Britain, therefore, it has never been easy for Anglicans, who are naturally and historically sympathetic to other cultures, to evangelise through issue-based or interest-group communities with the same confidence as Roman Catholics were once able to do in South America.

3. The *revolutionary* mode of church planting fully reflects Troeltsch's sect-type. This type of church planting is more like pentecostal church planting in South America than the planting of base communities. In general, Anglicans find this both too radical and disturbing. Especially is this true if church planters take to its logical conclusion a course of action recommended by Nigel Scotland;

> Put simply we need to 'unchurch the church'! One significant way by which this would be achieved is to allow Church of England planters the freedom to establish new congregations which are informal in style, lay led, without robes, without liturgical requirements of canon law, and which meet in non-church premises.[17]

To 'unchurch the church' is to take a very different course from that of the builders of base communities who aim to 'allow the church to be church'. It is a radical disassociation from the institution as we know it. The value of such a strategy could be to help liberate Christians from their inhibiting and restricting inheritance in terms of centralised bureaucratic church control of local finance, ministry, worship and mission. The danger is that emerging congregations are likely to become free-floating voluntary associations, not the needed corrective to an historic institution which has become hidebound by its self-limiting boundaries both seen and unseen.

Theologically speaking also, such revolutionary church planting does not do justice to the fact that we cannot manufacture communities, and certainly not 'communion'. Communities, worthy of the name, are not made. They grow. All we can do is make sure the soil is well prepared. To be sure, they require the voluntary element of personal commitment, but intimate relationships between the members, a shared sense of purpose and destiny, and a recognition of the worth of each person, be they weak or strong, all grow slowly. The identity which comes from such bonding comes not by unchurching the church, but rather by helping it to recognise the source of its dignity in the continuity in which it stands.

Anglican church planting - trinitarian in character

The welcome emphasis in the latter part of the 20th century upon the work of the Holy Spirit in the body of Christ has renewed the Anglican church in many of its parts. Nevertheless, a church of the Spirit, and nothing more, is shallow rooted, unbalanced and prone to excess or heresy. It is by a trinitarian faith that the Anglican church must be judged. A trinitarian church somehow has to keep in close connection each of the three persons. The creating God of providence who is present among us in all our history, including our church history, calls us to love the church. God with us, in the one who died and rose again to establish righteousness and justice in the sight of God and humankind, calls us not only to a vision but also to a radically alternative lifestyle and community which has within it the seeds of resurrection life and hence the renewal of the world. And God the Holy Spirit, who renews the people of God for the sake of all the created order, breaks new ground by removing the barriers which separate us both from God and our fellow human beings.

In many ways the unfolding story of Anglican church planting this century may be related to the work of the three persons of the trinity. Each has successively played an important part in the self understanding of the

17 Scotland, *Recovering the Ground*, p 48.

Anglican church and its mission to plant churches. What may be needed now, as has happened throughout the history of the church, is for one insight to correct the overemphasis of another. For, to be both trinitarian and Anglican, church plants will display four clear characteristics.

1. In an historic episcopal communion, Anglican church plants will be rooted, not free standing. This calls for both episcopal responsiveness and initiative. It is through their bishops that Anglicans will continue to express their connectedness with both the historical and the universal church.

2. In a locally focused accessible communion, Anglican church plants will be more open than bounded. Setting appropriate boundaries is a challenge for every Christian church which practises baptism in the name of the Trinity. Problematic boundaries vary from the institutional to the cultural. The boundaries of Anglican church plants, so far as possible, will only be the boundaries of Christian faith and discipleship.

3. In a communion which believes in the incarnation, Anglican church plants will be earthed in the context in which they are called to serve. It may be a neighbourhood where people live or a network of relationships in which people look for 'communion'. Anglicans cannot, however, surrender to the religious individualism of the voluntary association which is one of the principal spiritual enticements of post-modernity.

4. In an Anglican communion which believes in a practical rather than a speculative Christian religion, church plants will resist the religious fashions of the day. Adapting to circumstances in the cause of the gospel has always been an Anglican strength. Surrender to the whims of the religious consumer has never been an Anglican characteristic. Anglicans may well find it hard to resist the temptation, but if they succeed they will at the end of the day have made a valuable contribution to the partnership of all Christian churches. By their commitment to worship and pastoral care, for all and for each, Anglican church planters will reflect the character of the God in whom they believe.

The Revd Canon Ian Bunting is Director of Ordinands in Southwell Diocese