

EDITORIAL: Commuters-and the church

Paul Beasley-Murray

As a result of damaging my wrist by falling off the top of a ladder and not having power-assisted steering, I have been walking most days to my church this past week. It has been an interesting experience, for on my way I pass Chelmsford railway station, apparently the busiest commuter station in the South-East. As I walk down to church early in the morning I see hundreds of half-asleep commuters, and hundreds more of stressed-out commuters as I walk past the station in the early evening. The sight of these 'half-dead' specimens of humanity reminds me of the privilege we have as ministers not to be commuters. Yes, most of us work long hours: every evening this week I have been out, and on most of those evenings I have had two if not three appointments. But at least we are doing something positive with those hours, rather than just commuting. In our area it is not unusual for some commuters to spend three or more hours a day commuting - multiply that by five, and it amounts up to a significant amount of time.

Commuting, too, affects the mid-week programme of the church. Although we offer a meal, we have found that we cannot run an Alpha course before seven o'clock, because people are not able to get back any earlier, and we always have some who do not arrive until 7.30pm. Other evening meetings in our church normally begin at 8 pm, but even then we have to ensure we end relatively early, because many of our commuters will be on the station platform not much after 6am (so-called 'early morning' prayer meetings at 7 a.m. are too late to catch most of our commuters).

But should we expect our commuters to attend our mid-week meetings? Are we really being fair to them? The problem becomes more acute when both husband and wife are commuting: it means that when they get home there is no meal on the table. By the time they have made a simple meal, collapsed on the settee to watch a few minutes of television, they are ready to go to bed. As one of my members once said to me, "I get so screwed up during the week, you are lucky to see me on a Sunday morning". I believe we ministers need to be more understanding of the stresses faced by our people, and tailor our church programmes accordingly.

The only alternative would be to challenge our members to adopt a simpler life-style by giving up jobs which require commuting. But what right have we as comfortable non-commuters to make such a challenge? And do we seriously want sections of our society to become 'Christian-free' zones?

MEANING TO LIFE IN DEATH

Mike Thornton

Can we play 'Fly me to the moon' at my husband's funeral please Pastor? No doubt for pastoral practitioners engaged in local church or sector ministries, this request from a recently widowed lady during a pre-funeral visit seems only mildly bizarre compared to many suggested musical or literary elements requested to be included in funeral services these days. The question for the Christian minister is whether to include such items or not and in considering the issues seeking to determine if it will help the bereaved travel through the grieving process, and if it will help or hinder the ritual which aims to assist the bereaved transition from one social status (on this occasion married) to another (widowed). Concurrently the Christian minister is also seeking to impart a sense of hope and meaning, a sense of ontological security through the function of the ritual. Therefore, this type of request seems, *prima-facie*, absurd, yet perhaps, in the framing of the ritual, it has a place.

The church has never existed or operated in a vacuum, but within the social context of the culture in which it seeks to minister. In the past the church was able to make small adjustments in the way that it communicated the gospel story as one generation succeeded another, and so could catch up with the change affecting society as a whole. This has been the history of the church within, not only a European context, but a world-wide context, over some two thousand years. Today, perhaps the greatest challenge to date faces the church. Against a backdrop of unprecedented change and the rapid pace of transition within European and particularly British society since the end of the Second World War, the church finds itself under attack from a new enemy: the nature and speed of cultural change.