

The church of tomorrow

or

What the churches in Europe should do next?

or

Back to the future: understanding the past in order to own the future

What sort of church is God calling us to become, and what priorities should we discern, and what steps should we take in order to get there? And what is there in our past that can help us own the future? These are the questions I want to address in this talk, and although I am speaking from an English context and experience, I believe that some of the issues and challenges we face affect the whole of Europe. So let me begin with a story.

For many years I had a national job in the Church of England teaching about evangelism, and encouraging the church to think more creatively about how it shared its faith with others. I spoke at many different events and visited many churches. However, after about ten minutes I often found myself needing to shut up about evangelism and start talking about prayer instead. For to put it bluntly: you can't give what you haven't got. Before we are able to share the Christian faith, we have to receive it ourselves. Good news for the world has to begin as good news for me. Effective evangelism flows from a lived spirituality. The reason that many Christian people – and some clergy and pastors – are not able to communicate that faith as good news is because they no longer experience it as good news themselves. This must change. And without this change there will be no other changes. Indeed, there will be no church tomorrow. The church of tomorrow flows out of the evangelising witness of the church today. And if the church today is not a people of prayer, not a people whose lives are lived in joyful community with God, then there will be no evangelism. There will be nothing to share. Additional funding or changes to the law are not the central issue: but is your heart burning within you? Are you at a place where God can set you on fire with his love? Of course, the clergy need to be theologians. But first of all they need to be evangelists. And this evangelism will flow from their own intimacy with God, that intimacy that God has made possible through the death and resurrection of Christ.

Therefore the first priority of the church must be to teach people to pray. For too long we have assumed that people know what prayer is and are praying. We should no longer make this assumption. On the contrary we must make our churches school of prayer, where people discover their way of living intimately with God, reading the scriptures and attending to God's will and purpose for their lives. And although there is not time here to say more about prayer, I want to make it clear that prayer is, first of all, not about what we say to God, but about what God says to us. It is about placing ourselves in right relationship with God that we might receive from him, know ourselves to be his beloved, and then live his way. And this is vitally important for clergy. We need to be people of prayer. It is only by planting ourselves in the living streams of God's love and purposes for our lives that we will know what to do (see Psalm 1.3), know we are loved, and avoid the burnout that follows from a life lived anxiously in our own strength, with our own agenda, and seeking the acclaim of the world rather than the assurance of God.

Which leads me to my second point. We urgently need to develop a distinctive Christian lifestyle and ethic which can be evidently lived out in the world; a rule and pattern of life for the 21st century lay Christian. In so many respects the life of the church – that is the life of the people of God, lived out each day – is indistinguishable from anyone else’s life. We are as busy, as driven, as frantic as everyone else. Do we believe that God changes lives? Are we allowing God to change us? We have so got into bed with the values of the world that some people draw the conclusion that Christianity is our hobby. Just as some people play tennis, and others collect wild flowers and some go to the gym, we go to church. The church is our leisure activity. But it doesn’t change the way we live, the way we spend our money, the things we buy and the manner in which we inhabit the planet. We have to demonstrate that following Jesus Christ makes a difference. It changes us. This too flows from the life of prayer. For if we genuinely care for peace, or for the environment, then prayer will focus our attentiveness to God’s will for his world; and then encourage us to live out the very things we pray for. In this way we even begin to become the answer to our own prayers. God’s will is channelled in us and through us. Then our lives make a difference, demonstrating the new humanity we see in Christ. Our values and our actions reflect Christ and challenge others to change as well. Christianity itself is no longer seen as only a set of beliefs, or something that some people do on Sundays, but a way of life, a way of inhabiting life, treading lightly on the earth and genuinely caring for neighbour.

Thirdly, we need to learn how to evangelise. Across all of Europe we find situations where people are growing up without reference to the church and without knowledge of the Christian faith. We are not recalling them to a faith they have rejected or lost. They have never ever received this faith. This requires a new approach. It must flow from service and the sort of distinctive Christian lifestyle and ethic I have just mentioned. First of all people need to see what it looks like. And they will see that in us – or not! Then they will have many questions. They won’t necessarily know very much about the content of the faith. They won’t necessarily think in the same categories we do. Sin, for instance, may not be something they have ever even considered. All this requires sensitive listening and careful teaching, remembering that for most people today becoming a Christian will be like a journey. Therefore the primary way of understanding the ministry of evangelism is accompanying people on that journey. In England a lot of work has been done on catechetical models of evangelism, and this has borne fruit in the success of nurture courses like Alpha and Emmaus, both of which I believe are available in German translations. Every church needs to develop a ministry of evangelism and a place of nurture for people to explore and discover faith.

Fourthly, we need to remember our heritage. In the New Testament we see the early church growing for three inter-connected reasons:

1. The credibility and intellectual integrity of the faith that was being shared;
2. The ability of faith to clothe itself in the various cultures it encountered, and the fresh expressions of church that flowed from this;
3. The evidence in people's lives for the veracity and transforming energy of the gospel.

In other words the work of evangelism (the making known of the gospel of Jesus Christ) was woven tightly together with apologetics (the reasoning, arguing and commending of faith) and spirituality (the lived experience of Christian life).

This is the sort of holistic approach to evangelism that we should be nurturing in our church and for our world. Incidentally, its emphasis on apologetics and catechesis as much as proclamation, make it a pastoral approach to evangelism that is well suited to the Anglican and the Lutheran story and ethos. Also Europe – on the whole - was not evangelised by clergy but by monks. It was religious communities with a missional heart who evangelised the nations of Europe establishing centres of prayer, learning and mission. As we look to the future, here in Germany, and for me back home in England, we may need a re-imagining of this sort of Christian community; not necessarily more traditional religious communities, but Christian people living under a rule and living some sort of (probably dispersed) community life. It might be these cells of the church - what in England are sometimes called fresh expressions (though these can also be new congregations) that will actually be the means through which the Christian faith is carried and communicated. Well, if this is the case, it is also something the institutional church needs to be encouraging and blessing. And this is an issue for the leadership of the church. Are those being ordained learning about evangelism and church planting? Are they people of prayer? We need to look and see where God, the Holy Spirit is already moving people to live and express their faith in this way, learn from it and encourage it elsewhere, especially in the formation and training of new clergy.

Two more things: first, I believe we need to hold ourselves more accountable. What do I expect of myself as a follower of Jesus Christ and a minister of the gospel? How is my life a blessing to those I live with and those I meet? When people see me, do they see anything of the beauty and goodness of Christ? And if not, how can I grow in prayer and discipleship that my life might genuinely be part of God's apostolic mission to the world? And to whom am I accountable for all of this?

And what about our churches? Why it is that some churches are not teaching people to pray? And not providing opportunities for people to find out about the Christian faith? Could we not agree a set of expectations for ourselves so that our churches better demonstrate the ministry we all believe we are called to? This is not about success. Only God can give the growth. Only God is the evangelist. But it is about faithfulness. How can we be a faithful church, and what are the few things that should be the priority for every Christian community as we seek to live out the gospel in an increasingly secular and hedonistic age?

Finally we need to think about ministry itself. Christian ministry belongs to the whole people of God. Ordained ministry needs re-imagining. It is not the job of the minister to do all the ministry, but ensure that the faithful ministry I spoke out above is lived out in the life of each local church. This is the other vital way of avoiding burnout and fatigue. In England this has meant a greater emphasis upon the local pastor as leader and enabler. But it has also meant a proliferation and flourishing of self-supporting ordained ministry and authorised lay ministry. Ministry is a team game. Jesus sent them out in pairs. It is meant to be collaborative. In an Anglican parish it is not unusual to find a paid, stipendiary priest leading several churches and working with a team of other ordained and lay people, none of whom

is being paid for their ministry. I am not aware of this being quite the same in Germany, though I gather things are changing. I also believe that the historic three-fold pattern of ministry, that is bishops, priests and deacons, has not turned out to be a gift from God. We need more episcopate – more oversight and strategic leadership. And we need more diaconia – more unpaid clergy and lay people in authorised ministry. We need non-stipendiary clergy and more authorised lay ministry. But there must still be accountability. The gospel is far too precious for any one of us to imagine we can go it alone.

So what will the church of tomorrow be like? Well, if it is to grow and flourish and hold up to the world a new way of living and being, then that will depend on what it does now. As we look to some of the patterns and priorities we find in the New Testament and have seen ebb and flow through Christian history, it seems to me that these might be our next steps –

1. Teach people to pray. Everything flows from our life with God.
2. Establish some agreed rule or pattern about what you think it means to be a Christian in Germany today – something which is a blessing to the community where you live and serve as well as to your own life.
3. Learn again how to evangelise and establish place of nurture where people can find out about the Christian faith and let these flow into fresh expressions of Christian community.
4. Hold yourselves accountable to each other within the Body of Christ
5. Develop patterns of collaborative ministry which give expression to the biblical hallmarks of episcopacy and diaconia, and develop models of unpaid lay and ordained ministry.

And then go on praying, for the meaning of the Christian life is to live our lives in community with God; that community that God has made possible through Jesus Christ. Cut off from him we can do nothing (see John 15.5)