

# City Networks

by Douglas Flett

## THE CHURCH & THE CITY

This is a watershed time. A paradigm shift is occurring in the western church - the face of the church is changing. Like a spreading net, but not uniform, accurately structured, but not by man, relational yet global - an army, terrible with banners!

There are two concepts critical to these changes -

- The biblical nature of the Church in the city.
- The responsibility of the Church, under God, for the city.

## THE BIBLICAL NATURE OF THE CHURCH

The western 20th century Church has experienced a shift in practice. Earlier centuries had the domination of one 'denomination'. The Reformation saw a re-forming into several denominations. The 20th century saw this process continue with fragmentation into hundreds of denominations. But the real shift came in the second half of the 20th century with the emergence of the so-called 'para' church.

Tens of thousands of specialist organizations arose to meet the challenges of the Church to the world. The Billy Graham organization is a prime example of a specialist grouping was able to perform a function that no denomination has performed. In 1960, two young men were led by God to foreign missions and so Operation Mobilization and Youth With A Mission were born. Whilst the post WW2 Church in the UK has declined denominationally, the Church has exploded in growth through these 'non-parish' or 'non-congregational' forms of church.

The picture on the canvas of the centuries is of greater and greater decentralisation, more and more variety, and less and less central control at a human level.

Yet still, in the minds of many Christians, is the concept that the only valid church is the congregation or parish unit linked to a large denomination. Even for many evangelicals, the fact that large percentages of traditional 'members' are nominal and not born-again does nothing to detract from the authority given and recognition of the denomination and its subsidiary units.

Nor does the history of the European parish system, with its roots in feudal tenure and secular rule, detract from the unchallenged concept of the congregation as the only valid expression of the Church. And the structure of control of the congregation, whilst biblical on paper with its eldership or parish council, is still weighted to the 'living' or the person who pays and influences the paid professional.

## ON-GOING REFORM

Reformation has not stopped. Church restructuring continues today as the life of the Church bursts out in prayer cells, house groups, cell churches, celebration gatherings and city church. Our concepts have to catch-up with what the Spirit of God is doing.

Changing concepts from being cultural or traditional to being biblical is an integral part of reform. Look at the 'reform' concepts of the past,- the Reformation was backed by biblical teaching on the work of grace and faith; the Missions revival, beginning with the Moravians and then Carey, taught and practiced evangelism and mission; the Brethren movement challenged the concepts of eldership and church leadership; and lastly the Pentecostal explosion of the 20th century has produced the largest single denomination, the largest number of denominations and the largest single congregation the world has seen - they taught biblical power and the variety of spiritual gifts.

Challenging the traditional concept of the Church itself is a huge undertaking. There are powerful bondages in the mind, linked to association and familiarity. There are strong areas of self-interest present in such a discussion. Challenging familiar concepts stirs-up fears and prides. But we must go back to first principles and see what scripture says about the Church.

The word for Church in the New Testament is 'Ecclesia'. In the Bible it is only used in relation to, a) The Cell or House Church, b) Geographic or City Church, and c) Universal Church, although Paul does refer to the children of Israel in the Moses time as the 'ecclesia in the wilderness'. Ecclesia means "the called-out ones" the "the separate society" Yet the congregational unit is the form of church which dominates our present western culture and the City Church has been almost non-existent.

The Church in the city is the scale of church, which has by far the most biblical references. Indeed, you will do well to find one scriptural reference that refers specifically to a congregational unit or size of church. There were probably congregations in Ephesus and Corinth and elsewhere in biblical times, but the references are almost exclusively to the city church. There are several references to the Church in the home, or the Church that meets in so-and-so's house.

#### OLD TESTAMENT EQUIVALENT - THE HOUSE OF GOD

In the Old Testament the emphasis is on the larger units of God's people - the city or the temple. The pre-exilic smaller group was the extended family group as part of a clan and then the tribe. The post exile synagogue scale developed with little reference in scripture. Isaiah 56:7 "My house will be called a house of prayer for all the peoples."

Haggai 1 and Malachi 3 both speak of fruitlessness and a curse that exists among God's people because of the 'desolation' or 'ruins' of the House of the Lord. This House is usually equated with the congregational scale of Church, but there is a blind spot toward the city Church. Perhaps the City scale of Church is more appropriate to the scripture in these contexts? At many times in history, God has stirred His people across a city to pray and floods of revival and refreshing has followed, blessing that city and spilling over into nations.

#### THE RESPONSIBILITY OF THE CHURCH IN THE CITY

"That's not my vision" is often said about the city vision as congregational leaders press on with their local ministry and its vision. Denominations do not embrace city vision and national ministries and movements cannot do more than touch their particular sector or area of expertise. So who can reach the city? Who can hear what is upon God's heart for the city? Who can mobilise and coordinate the whole Church to touch the whole city?

Do we need a wider vision? Is there a need to meet the wider city vision? What do the scriptures say? We are all part of the one Body of the Church and we need to share its wider vision and the wider responsibilities placed upon it. There is a theology and a practice of the Church in the City, which God is emphasising, by His Spirit in these days. It is deeply challenging and it falls in-line with the decentralising trends of the past six centuries.

"You have sown much, but harvest little.." In Haggai chapter 1, we see a description the church life in UK, but not church life in South America where they have discovered the practical theology of unity in the citywide church. "You harvest little because the House of the Lord lies in ruins..." Perhaps our "panelled houses" are the self-interest of our parish or organisational cloisters. These are the smaller units, which have been nurtured to the neglect of the wider Church - the House of the Lord.

Do we recognize the Body of Christ, the Church, as we are required to do before partaking in communion (1 Cor.11) ? Many are weak and many sleep because the Body of Christ is not recognised and because we do not judge ourselves.

## BIBLICAL EXAMPLES

Jeremiah 29: 4-14:

This contains the familiar scripture we often put at the foot of a letter or greetings card; "I know the plans I have for you..." v11. But the context is Babylon and the prime directive to the people of God in verse 7 - "Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf; for in its welfare you will have welfare."

They were not to be 'waiting for glory' in the sweet bye and bye. They were not to wait for a quick repatriation back to Judah. God's people are often blind to the cities in which they live, blind to God's vision for the city and ignorant of the impact the Church of the Living God can corporately make on a city. In Jeremiah we are told to 'seek' and to 'pray' - one practical and action orientated, the other located into hearing heaven's strategy and purposes for the city.

When God's people learn to pray for their city - people find God, the atmosphere, the business, the youth, the civic leaders all change.

Proverbs 29 ; 4 and 8 :

The moral quality of leadership is one of the keys, determining factors in the life of the city. Good leadership brings stability; poor or bad leadership is corrosive in the life of the nation or city. Bribery and corruption start at the top.

A second corrosive factor is mockery - or perhaps cynicism mixed with apathy. Is there pride and an aloof attitude in leaders? Wisdom is key to reducing friction in the city caused by anger and bad relationships.

Isaiah 1 : 21 - 26 :

What are the characteristics of your city? God characterised Jerusalem as a harlot. That is, Jerusalem had the same nature and effects as a harlot - she was a carrier of death, immoral, deceitful, a destroyer of families, filthy.

God described certain aspects of her fall - silver that was devalued by impurity, currency that was devalued and produce which was inferior and watered-down. Leaders were corrupt - rebellious toward God. What is the spiritual condition of leaders in the city - beginning with the House of God? What about the captains of finance, of industry, of police, of local government in our city?

2 Kings 17;24 - 34 :

What are the idols in the city? Syncretism is an ancient fault. It is the mixing of the worship of God and of idols at the same time. It is the polluting of true worship with alien traditions and beliefs. Elijah said to Israel, "How long will you halt between two opinions..." Halting is like walking with one foot on the pavement and one on the roadway. The Israelites were mixing Baal worship with worship of God and Mt Carmel was about choosing.

What are the wrong mixtures today, first in the Church itself, then in the City? Four key questions, -

- How would you characterise your city?
- What are the things wrong in your city?
- Why are they wrong?
- What can be done to rectify the situation?

Ezekiel 8:1 -18: Revelation of the hidden things in the Church and the City. Uncovering before treatment. Ezekiel 9: Judgement begins in the house of God ( 1 Pet 4:17 ). Ezekiel 11: Naming names and using spiritual authority.

Across the nation, city and area networks have been developing. Many UK cities have some sort of network. Most start with fellowship among church leaders, joint evangelism and some are moving into the social and political agendas. What is God doing ? We all need to know.

Ecclesia, the Greek word translated 'church' in the New Testament, is only used in relation to, a) The Cell or House Church, b) the geographic or City Church, and c) the Universal Church. Yet the congregational form dominates western culture and the City Church has been almost non-existent. Isaiah 56:7 "My house will be called a house of prayer for all the peoples." In history, God has stirred His people across cities to pray and floods of revival and refreshing has followed, blessing the city and spilling over nations.

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