

New Monastic Communities Conference

- Great to see what and who's represented here
 - Just one of many gatherings in the pioneering world that are happening around the country this Autumn.
 - One of many signs that the Fresh Expressions movement is on the move.
 - The landscape is changing
 - From 'initiative to movement'
 - Exciting time and challenging time

But of course when was pioneering of any kind not challenging, and especially when it involves the Church!

I was amused to read about our saint for today, Teresa of Avila, hugely relevant for our gathering, who in an age when women had very little voice, still managed to set up 17 new communities with a laser focus on prayer. But in doing so she wasn't labelled as a remarkable and prayerful pioneer, but rather as (quote) "a restless, disobedient gadabout"! That'd be a pretty good name for a community, wouldn't it? 'The Order of restless disobedient gadabouts'.

And actually the word 'restless' is a great word for those of us longing to see a fresh flow of renewal in all that we're doing: "Our hearts are restless till they find their rest in you".

And what I'd like to do for a few moments is take you through 4 words that I believe the Fresh Expressions movement is resting on and wrestling with at the moment. And these words are coming up time and time again now in the conversations and writings and deliberations that we're all involved in, and I think they'll be very relevant here this weekend too.

And the words are:

- reimagining
- partnering
- embedding
- reproducing

1. reimagining

And how relevant is the psalm this morning:

- ‘He counts the number of the stars and calls them each by name’.
- ‘He covers the sky with clouds; supplies the earth with rain..’
- ‘He spreads the snow like wool and scatters the frost like ashes...hurls down hail like pebbles.. stirs up his breezes and the waters flow’.

Our God is a God of incredible imagination and fresh expressions in the very widest sense. But then even in our context, and back in the land of religious institutions, the words ‘innovation’ and ‘imagination’ are really beginning to take hold, and especially in the Church of England as renewal and reform is gaining momentum.

and yet there’s also an increasing sense I believe that the sheer scale of imagination that is now needed to take the Church where it needs to be, is way beyond where any of us have got to so far...and we really do need the imagination of the Spirit. And then of course there’s always the danger as well of that default to be dragged back to the safe and the familiar, where even an organisation called ‘Fresh Expressions’ can scarily quickly become institutionalised and not really want to change.

So how important that any movement that uses a title like ‘new monastic communities’, does actually stay fresh and refreshed and is something that is refreshing the Church.

Many of us are agreeing now I think that the very way we use language and vocabulary is a huge challenge in itself.

- And language can cover up a multitude of sins can't it.
- where we use the word 'new' when there isn't much new.
- or we go on about 'looking outwards' whilst we're actually just staring inwards and gazing navels.
- And we end up full of jargon, instead of fully authentic.

So I'd genuinely want to encourage us first of all to take this reimagine word seriously.

I love the illustration that George Lings once gave me. We were having breakfast together one day, and as we talked he was comparing all of our efforts to do mission well, to standing on a diving board in a swimming pool, and all of our mission programmes and initiatives are about how to help people to do the perfect dive into the pool, & the pool of course is the Church as we know it. But he said, of course, doing mission today is a completely different sport, and so it's not a diving board we need, but a surf board. And as we engage with the world in mission, it takes us out of the pool and onto the beach and straight into the sea, where we really are trying to catch and ride the waves, in an untamed and unpredictable ocean. And that's pretty exciting and nerve racking and it'll take you just about anywhere in mission. But then he said "do you know what scares me to death? It's that the church has suddenly discovered surfing, and now it's saying "this is fantastic. Now how can we build a wave machine to put inside the pool ! "

And boy is it so easy and tempting to do just that.

And to be honest, and just to use an example from my own journey...

15 years ago when the Cell Church movement was being introduced in the U.K., with its emphasis on creating outward looking missional small group communities, it really did feel for many people like coming out of the pool and onto the beach, and

many churches with a small group model got involved in some way. And many of them were saying “Here at last is a way to start surfing in mission, and we’re not going to use the diving board anymore...We’re going to have missional cell groups in place of our home study groups.

But then 10 years later and we had to ask the question: “How many churches really did learn how to surf, and how many just built a wave machine and called it Cell Church.

How many, in other words, were just doing home groups by another name? And the answer was probably most of them.

I think the most important word I’ve added to my vocabulary in doing all this is the word Paradigm Shift. And if you look it up in the dictionary, it says

“a fundamental change of approach,
or a change of underlying assumptions.”

And what it really means is that we’ve been looking at things in a certain way, and now we’re not only going to see things differently, but our whole approach to the way we see is going to shift.

Just to use a personal picture, a few years ago I took my family off to Florida to see a real live coral reef, cos one of my hobbies then was marine fish keeping. So we saved up for this very special holiday and went off to the Keys. And when we got there, it wasn’t exactly as we’d expected. Cos they put us on a boat and they took us out to sea, till all you could see was the sea.

So there we were floating on this totally empty sea, but then they gave us a few instructions, and as we dropped our heads under the water, our whole world completely transformed..thousands

upon thousands of gorgeous corals and multi coloured fish, and of course it was stunning.

But that's a very good picture of paradigm shift, because the action itself may be relatively small, but the impact it has on the way we view our world is radical and transforming.

And you know I have to admit that before I took that on board in my own ministry, there were too many times where what I seemed to be seeing in mission and community building was an empty sea,

Where you know we've tried everything in the book to welcome these people, but we're still seeing empty pews, empty meetings and empty hearted believers who don't want to get more involved in community.

But this is a bit like when Jesus said to the disciples – don't fish on that side, fish over this side, and don't fish where you can see, but where I'm seeing, and don't look on the surface, look under the surface – and you will see the shoals. But there has to be that shift, and not just in the way we do things, but in the whole approach to the way we see, and the way we perceive the mission landscape.

And in fact that becomes essential as we start doing church in new ways, or what we can end up with is what a guy called Bill Hogg called "pigs with lipstick"

– And that's a very good picture.

In other words if we're not careful, we're dealing with the same old thing, the same old home group that isn't very attractive, so we doll it up with lipstick – tag on the witness and mission section and hope for the best. Or we take the same old service and add on a new liturgy and give it a different name or whatever, Or forgive me for saying, the same old religious order, where we add on the word... 'new'. But where there's very little shift in our approach to the way we see.

So let's embrace what it really means to reimagine:

- Not simply changing the way we do things
- Or the way we see things
- But changing our approach to the way we see.
- And praying for that imagination of the Spirit.

But then the second word, partnering, which actually follows on naturally from the reimagine word.

And that if we're to truly reimagine, there's no way that one person or group or community or denomination even, can hear the Spirit on its own.

And increasingly, partnership is absolutely essential.

So I was delighted to see the variety and scale and depth of experience that's represented here.

- CofE, Meth, URC, SA, CofS - CofI, CofW, Scottish episcopal, baptists.
- FE Community
- Strategic Hubs, Pioneer Centres, Religious Com
- International Learning Community
- Communications strategy int resource centre

But a wonderful microcosm of potential partnerships here today...What will it mean for you here to be "better together"? Better connected, better networked, better informed?

And then the third word is 'Embedding', which is all about grafting and blending the new into the very fabric of our Church.

And that of course is part of the richness that anything with a genuine DNA of 'new monastic' can bring, because it models what it means to dig deeply into the wealth and treasures of our ancient inheritance, and then allows the Spirit to breathe new life into them, to re-imagine a religious missional community life.

And yes there's a danger that embedding turns into domesticating and institutionalising, but the vision for a mixed economy is that the 2 ends of any spectrum can revitalise each other.

2 quotes:

The first from a guy called Jim Collins who tracks what it is that makes some organisations excel in every sense. And he says:

“A truly visionary organisation embraces continuity and change, conservatism and progressiveness, stability and revolution, predictability and chaos, heritage and renewal, fundamentals and craziness, and and and...”

Jim Collins

And then Alan Hirsch, who's speaking about the 2 ends of the spectrum in the Church says this:

“The truth is that both groups, being purists, can be captive to the limits of their own acquired and prejudicial thinking, and are blinded to the possibilities of seeing the whole Church become more...and for the vast majority of churches, this oppositional thinking has blocked our capacities to move forward..”

Alan Hirsch

But the conversations here I'm sure will cross and celebrate the whole spectrum, and ask what it means to help change the culture of the whole church through its life and practice. So reimagine, partner and embed, then finally reproduce.

One of the very best things about the Fresh Expressions movement has been its ability to reproduce. And in the Church of England alone we now know that over the past decade, over 30,000 Christians have gone out and planted over 2,000 fresh

expressions of church, with over 80,000 mainly unchurched people attending.

But what does it mean to take the seed and the dna and the depth of an authentic religious community, and then do a Teresa of Avila, and reproduce and reproduce and reproduce again? that's the challenge. What does it take not to settle for a cosy religious me- focused community ? When as someone put it: "God doesn't just want us to have a nice experience in the Holy Spirit. He wants to change the face of the Church and the face of the earth".

And effectively it takes the grit and determination and full on discipleship that our Gospel reading talks about. Or as Tom Wright put it: "Luke 12 is a standing rebuke to all half-hearted relaxed Christianity".

And New Monastic communities at their very best do bring a prophetic Luke 12 ingredient to the Church, and I hope above anything that you will be built up and inspired this weekend to take away a fresh infusion of that reproducing disciple-making DNA.