

A red ribbon graphic with a white border, containing the text 'Becoming a Future Church' in white. The ribbon is folded at the top and has a pointed bottom.

Becoming  
a  
Future  
Church

# Does the answer lie within?

Part 2 of a 4 part series looking at the Church and how we can face the future.

Dr George Marchinkowski

An initiative of the Missional  
Congregations Project of the UPCSA

A solid red horizontal bar at the bottom of the page.

# Becoming a Future Church

## Does the answer lie within?

The author Phyllis Tickle had the idea that every 500 years or so, Western culture has a massive “rummage sale”<sup>1</sup> during which “every part of it is reconfigured”<sup>2</sup>. She illustrated this by showing how the Protestant Reformation (1517), which should not be divorced from its socio-political and economic circumstances, is a prime example of such an upheaval. The Reformation resulted in a total disruption of the Church and a brand new way of doing faith when the Protestant Churches burst onto the scene. Many of us who are Protestants look back on the sixteenth century has a powerful revival of God’s Spirit and many Catholics see the subsequent renewal of the Catholic Church<sup>3</sup> as a similarly powerful process. Everything changed – not only the Church but also in everyday life. The feudal system with its strict class divide between the wealthy and the labouring poor was starting to crumble. The printing press was making literature available and more and more people were consequently becoming literate. The middle class emerged – opportunities for self-made wealth were emerging. Commercial Shipping, personal travel and other such modern innovations were changing the world. Capitalism emerged as the dominant characteristic of Western culture,<sup>4</sup> and Science was taking major strides forward. Religion (and the evolution of our faith) is far more closely tied to culture than we realise!

If you would like to follow Tickle’s thinking, then you might go another 500 year step backwards to the Great Schism of 1054 (The separation of the Eastern and Western Churches). This was far more than just a Church matter due to the *filioque* clause. It had military, lingual, economic and cultural causes too but again, the churches, both east and west experienced a renaissance coming out of that. One may go back 1 500 years and examine the decline and fall of the Roman empire and the powerful Monastic Christianity that emerged from that.<sup>5</sup> Of course, 2 000 years ago, an event so significant happened that we call it “the common era” and we divide history there. This powerful event caused the very birth of the Church as a force for good and transformation in the earth<sup>6</sup>.

If one follows Tickle’s theory, then perhaps all these changes that are happening around us, are coming exactly at the right time. As the 500 year horizon passed at the turning of the millennium, then maybe we were ready for our Quincentennial Rummage Sale.

As previously mentioned<sup>7</sup>, Hirsch and others believe that what is happening to us offers us an adaptive challenge.<sup>8</sup> The implication is that we can become better if we respond to this change. Is it possible, as Tickle insinuates, that this quincentennial may also bring with it an upsurge in Church life, in spirituality and in devotion to Christ?

While the world around us is changing, there is another great concern for the Church. The Western Church is suffering from what can best be described as a crisis of infertility.

### **What skills do we have to ride the change?**

Over the years of my ministry, there have been many books, programmes and projects that have been put forward as tools to help the Church evolve, change or grow. Most of these have come from the Church Growth Movement but there have been tools that have come out of a psychology based approach or even adaptations of business models. Each of these has become fashionable for a season but ultimately, they have made little difference. The ex-South African, Alan Hirsch, has been suggesting something quite different since he began writing about Missional Church in 2003. Hirsch proposes that everything we need to grow the Church<sup>9</sup> has been implanted in Christian communities by God the Holy Spirit and that all we need do is to rediscover this, and do this and watch this transform the Church.

One of the reasons this idea is so attractive is that it does not seem to borrow from other disciplines nor does it come as a pre-packaged programme ready for us to implement. Rather, Hirsch points out five (actually six) facets of what he believes was fundamental in the story of the Early Church (which he contends are also prominently present in the Church in contemporary China) and he lifts these out as elements on a Missional or an Apostolic DNA. He suggests that there is nothing new here, that these things are within and that when we “remember them”, we can release a power that grows the Church.

The elements are:

1. The simple message that “**Jesus is Lord**”;
2. **Disciple Making** as the responsibility of every Christian;
3. The **Missional-Incarnational impulse** – the thrust to go out and move in;
4. Cultivation of an **Apostolic environment** – relating to leadership and ministry;
5. **Organic Systems** – moving away from the Church as institution to the Church as movement; and
6. **Communitas** – a shared adventure or ordeal which binds Christians together.

### **It’s not that the tools are wrong but how we use them**

By far the greatest number of Missional Thinkers in our day believe that it is not that we have the wrong tools but rather that we have forgotten how to use them or that we are us-

ing them toward the wrong ends. For too long, we have been trained and conditioned to use our gifts and skills to build the Church as institution. Presbyterians have their own form of Apostolic succession and that is the denominational Church with its interrelating series of Councils (previously hierarchy of Courts).

The best of us learn the rules (*Manual of Faith and Order*) and the way the Councils work and we guard them, undergird and strengthen them. This is what we are trained to do. Unfortunately, the Church as institution is dying. She no longer has Christendom to sustain and protect her. And so, here we are – ministers and elders of the Christendom Church – with skills and gifts fit to build and preserve a Church that is fading away. The services I was trained to lead are the ones that take place in Church buildings with pews, pulpit and communion table. They start with a call to worship, have a well written and researched sermon in the middle and end with a benediction. I am a leader, a manager, a pastor and a teacher.

What happens to me in a Church that is becoming participative, where all the members are involved in the service? And how will I fit in where the furniture has changed and where sermons are no longer a sought after medium for witnessing to Christ? Most of my ministry has taken place in a context where people came to us. We believed that if they were not coming, either we were doing something wrong<sup>10</sup> or we were not communicating the value of what we were doing well enough. Now we are increasingly living in an age and among a generation that are either “done with Church” or interested in faith but not so much in Church.

Hirsh believes that these skills of mine (and yours) can be turned toward a new way of doing and being Church. He suggests that if we can see the Church as a movement (like the liberation movements) and not as an institution, then we will be on the right track. In a movement, structures are fluid – people are organised into smaller cells but arrangements are word-of-mouth and more flexible. People feel an energy to give themselves to the founder’s (or the movement’s) mission. This, Hirsch believes, is pretty much what Jesus had in mind for the twelve and the seventy two (Luke 10).

### **A brief description of the six elements of the Missional DNA**

The Apostolic DNA, according to Hirsch, is a “simple, intrinsic, reproducible, central guiding mechanism” that is “necessary for the reproduction and sustainability of genuine missional movements”<sup>11</sup>. The elements listed above will now be briefly explained:

The first part of the DNA is a simple message, **Jesus is Lord**. The people of Israel were given a simple way to remember their faith, “Hear O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is One.”<sup>12</sup> The early Christians also had a very simple understanding of faith – “Jesus is Lord”<sup>13</sup> or

even “He is risen!”<sup>14</sup> The concern is that 1 700 years of Christendom Church has provided us with mountains of speculative theology. Denominations have taken confrontational stances at either side of every doctrine. A return to the simple heart of the faith may be just the thing we need.

The second aspect describes what is understood as the main purpose of the Church, **Disciple making**. Jesus invested himself in a group of twelve men, preparing them to carry his Good News to the world. Matthew 28: 18 - 20 articulates, it is believed, Christ’s commission to not only his first disciples but also all who would come disciples afterward. So as to build Christ’s kingdom and further witness to his Gospel, Disciple making is the Church’s chief concern. Our inability to do this effectively is one of the main reasons we face this *crisis of infertility*.<sup>15</sup>

The third facet, the **Missional-Incarnational impulse**. We serve a missionary God who goes before us, who is at work in the world he sent his son to save (See John 3: 16). Mission is not simply something the Church does but rather an imitation of what God is doing all the time. We join what God is already, and always doing – bringing his kingdom on earth by drawing all people to himself.<sup>16</sup>

The Incarnational part is reminiscent of Christ who “moved into the neighbourhood”<sup>17</sup> at the first Christmas. The concern here is that Christians have not gone out into the world and certainly not moved into the neighbourhoods of the world. Rather thanks to Augustine and the influence of platonic thinking, we created the sacred/secular divide. The world was considered secular and tainted and the church was sacred, holy ground. We built walls to keep sacred in and secular out and made a life for ourselves on the inside of those walls. I am one who had lived on the inside quite content to be in the Church and not in the world.

The fourth and fifth facets, an **Apostolic environment** and **Organic systems** have to do with leadership. The word Apostle has been so misused in recent years, especially in Africa and especially among the charismatic churches. Every Tom, Dick and Harry claims to be an Apostle with direct access to miracles and wonders. The Apostolic gifts<sup>18</sup> are Entrepreneurial. They emerge at the start of Church and are directly involved in planting and starting new worshipping (or faith) communities. When the question was recently put to our Ministry Committee, it was discovered that of the five offices envisaged by Paul in Ephesians 4, ministers who exhibit only two sets of skills, those belonging to the offices of Pastor and Teacher are selected for the ministry. Those who exhibit a talent in the area of the apostolic, the prophetic or the evangelistic are sent elsewhere. They don’t seem to make good ministers. Is it not a wonder that we can’t seem to give birth?

Hirsch suggests that if the Church is to become a movement again, we should seek to transform our institutional structures with their accompanying hierarchies copied from Rome for more **organic structures** – these are closer to the images used of the New Testa-

ment church.<sup>19</sup> Hirsch has some fascinating examples of Organic growth including lessons learned from chaos theory.

Finally, Hirsch puts forward the notion of ***Communitas*** as the binding force between Christians. *Communitas* is a sense of comradeship birthed in adventure and struggle (Persecution in the Early Church). It emerges when we do God's work (or engage in Mission) together. This is distinct from the shapeless notion of Community which is supposedly what we become without really doing anything.

These elements are worth exploring as we pursue the question of what it will take to become a movement again. This transformation (from an institution to a movement) seems inevitable in the light of the great changes in our western culture at this time. If it really is time for the Great Rummage sale to begin, then maybe these elements hold the key to the change that will come.

### **Questions:**

1. Which of the five facets of the Apostolic DNA does your church do best? Which of the five does your church do worst or not do at all? How can that change?
2. What would a Church that did disciple-making well look like? If the purpose of our Christian Education is providing skills for disciple-making, how is your church doing? If your Christian Education is doing something else, what is that?
3. What does your congregation need to do to harness the power of the apostolic DNA?

## Further reading:

Alan Hirsch, *The Forgotten ways. Reactivating the missional church*. Brazos Press, Grand Rapids, 2006. (Introduction, Chapters 1 & 2)

Alan Hirsch & Darryn Altclass, *The Forgotten ways Handbook. A practical guide for developing missional churches*. Brazos Press, Grand Rapids, 2009.

Phyllis Tickle, *Emergence Christianity. What it is, where it is going, and why it matters*. Baker Books, Grand Rapids, 2012. (Part 1).

- 
1. Tickle 2012: 25.
  2. *Ibid*: 17.
  3. This started with the Council of Trent in 1545 and, of course, included the incredible increase in mystics such as Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross.
  4. *Ibid*: 19.
  5. Notably the establishment of Benedictine Communities (monks and nuns) and the publication of the "Rule of St Benedict"
  6. I am referring, of course, to the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, on whom the Church is founded.
  7. See my previous article, *Everything has changed*.
  8. An adaptive challenge is a "situation where a living system faces the challenge to find a new reality... Adaptive challenges set the context for innovation and adaption." (Hirsch and Altclass, 2009, *The Forgotten Ways Handbook*, Brazos Press, Grand Rapids, 202).
  9. "Imagine there was a power that lies hidden at the very heart of God's people. Suppose this power was built into the initiating "stem cell" of the Church by the Holy Spirit ... Imagine that if rediscovered, this hidden power could unleash remarkable energies that could propel Christianity well into the twenty first century..." Hirsch 2006: 15). G
  10. Hirsch has an excellent list of 7 things we thought we had to do to be successful (2006: 45).
  11. *Ibid*: 76.
  12. Deuteronomy 6: 4 – 9.
  13. Romans 10: 9.
  14. Matt 28: 6, Mark 16: 6, Luke 24: 6.
  15. "Crisis of infertility" is another way of referring to our inability to plant churches or grow the Church.
  16. Ephesians 1: 9 – 10.
  17. John 1: 14b (The Message Translation).
  18. See Ephesians 4: 11 & 12.
  19. See body imagery in 1 Corinthians 12 and the parables of Jesus describing the kingdom (Matthew 13).



*Dr George Marchinkowski is Colleague Minister at St Mungo's, Bryanston, a former Moderator of the General Assembly and at present, Convener of the UPCSA's Committee on Mission and Discipleship.*