

Mission Shaped Church for Older People?
Mark Russell's speech at launch (November 2008)

Everywhere I go I am trumpeted as the youngest ever CEO of Church Army. For years I have been a passionate advocate for the church taking ministry to young people more seriously. And I passionately believe that to be true. However I believe the church needs to take its mission to older people far more seriously too. The average age of most congregations is higher than we would like, and makes the absence of young people glaringly obvious. However it can also lead us into a false sense of security that we are ministering pretty well to older people. The report we launch today, and the research of my colleague Mike Collyer in the Sheffield Centre makes clear, the church is not reaching or discipling significant numbers of older people either.

Church Army's purpose is to enable people to come to a living faith in Jesus Christ and we are committed to reaching the least the last and the lost with the transforming good news of Christ. Older People are one group who are often undervalued, unfairly stereotyped and overlooked in our society today. I am immensely grateful to be speaking at an event like this to celebrate and champion work, especially mission work, with older people.

When I was a youth worker I brought 10 kids to Mr Wilson's garden in Rickmansworth. He was a 90 year old man who was due to illness confined to his home. His garden was like a jungle! The kids looked horrified! When I asked Mr Wilson what he wanted us to do, he said cut a path so that the gasman doesn't get stung when he goes to read the meter. I pointed out British Gas have been stinging me for years! I turned to the guys and said "blitz it!" make it look like Charlie Dimmock and Groundforce have been. I watched the tears run down that man's face. He had never been to church. 90 years old, and no sermon more eloquently spoke Christ's love than 10 teenagers with nettle stings and sweat. As a church we started to build links with Mr Wilson,

Church Army have been working with older people for over 120 years – founder member of Age Concern and Friends of the Elderly. Delighted to have a partnership with the Leveson centre and I whole-heartedly endorse their important work.

Today we are launching *A Mission-shaped Church for Older People*, which has been jointly produced by Church Army's Sheffield Centre and the Leveson Centre. The feedback we have had so far has been very positive. This event has been given a subtitle of "wrestling with the issues". So let me throw out 3 issues for you to think about.

1st Issue – Is mission-shaped church thinking for older people relevant?

a) Yes, because attendance is not keeping up with population growth...

Some might say that church attendance of this age group, in contrast with teenagers and young adults appears healthy but is church attendance of older people *keeping up* with the massive population growth of older people in general? Over the last 50 years, there has been a 45 per cent increase of the number of people aged 50 and over. In 1951, there were 13.8 million. In 2003, there were 20 million.¹ So have we seen a 45%

¹ Office for National Statistics: November 2005 focus on Older People p.1

increase in church attendance in over 50s? No we haven't. We must not let the age profile of our churches deceive us from what is still a considerable mission task.

b) Yes, because older people aren't one homogenous group...

The term "older people" is used to describe a group of people, far more diverse than ever before. Clearly working with older people is no longer a simple task given the age span covered ranging from 55 to 105, as Age Concern define the term "older people"! Do we reach a 55 year old the same way as a 91 year old? Of course not, no more than we would reach a 4 year old the same way as a 17 year old! No one way of doing church or evangelism will fit all. These groups grew up in very different worlds to each other.

Church Army Evangelist Penny Horseman is working at Mind Body and Spirit Fairs in Essex engaging with new agers many of whom fit into the 55-64 age bracket. They were the movers and shakers in the 1960s. Broadly speaking, they are the generation of folk who have a keen interest in spirituality while at the same time a deep distrust of traditional religion. Most significantly for us, an increasing proportion of these pre-seniors have never had any meaningful contact with church in their lifetime. Increasingly, mission to them means engaging with them where they are, like Penny is doing, rather than inviting them back to traditional forms of church they've already dismissed as boring and not relevant.

c) Yes, because older people are often overlooked as a mission resource...

The stereotypical images of elderly frail people suggest they lack energy and are resistant to change but as we all know they are people with skills and wisdom coupled with a desire to share.

Captain Paul Warren has written about "Men's sheds" from Australia in Mike Collyer's Information Bulletin No. 20 Newly retired ordinary church members wanted to use their skills to give the drop-outs from the local schools a chance to find employment. They refurbished a hut, contacted local schools and began teaching them various practical skills such as woodwork, electrics, plumbing, gardening etc. Over the work bench, they share their faith. Older and younger men are working side by side on a voluntary basis to assist the elderly frail with day to day house maintenance tasks.

The newly retireds are a fantastic mission resource. In generations passed, retirement meant a closing down of life. Today, now our retired are fitter and richer, retirement means a blossoming/opening out of life with the freedom and time to pursue those things you want to. If our newly retired were the movers and shakers of the 60s, they will bring into retirement their activism, independency, sense of adventure, thinking outside the box - all of which will be a fantastic mission resource.

2nd Issue – What does it mean to be "mission-shaped" in the context of work with older people?

a) It means not just reimagining church for existing Christians but always looking to those beyond our church connections...

In Michael Collyer's excellent series *Discovering Faith in Later Life*, his most recent paper tells the story of a local Sheffield church who felt the need to develop their shrinking Thursday morning communion service to give it new life. They introduced scones and coffee after the service to encourage fellowship. This proved very popular. But rather than stopping there, they asked themselves how they might connect with

more people in the community *outside the church*. Out of their conversations with such folk, they've established a range of activities such as a fortnightly games afternoon, fortnightly friendship club, half day outings to places like Chatsworth house, arts/self-expression all giving many entry points for newcomers according to their interests to make new friends, visit with old friends, invite spouses, build a sense of community that makes them feel valued. Like many other examples, churches are finding they need to sow seeds before they can reap.

b) It means listening well and not assuming we know what older people will want.

Another of Mike's *Discovering Faith in Later Life* papers tells the story of Mo Smith in south west London. An ordinary church goer, she felt called to work with the elderly people in her area. She asked lots of questions, talked to the residents, talked to the council, read reports and discovered that many elderly frail living in the local tower blocks were being by-passed by the normal care systems. *Rather than replicate existing work* with groups in the community that are already provided for either by churches or the council, here was a gap that the church could help plug. Mo has established a ministry that has helped reduce their sense of isolation. For instance have you ever thought of taking a group of elderly isolated frail living with dementia on a day trip to Alton Towers to ride on the rollercoasters? Mo has! But more than just caring for the practical needs, Mo's project nurtures their faith. Recently a 92 year old man was baptised by full immersion and was applauded by luncheon club members when he gave his testimony. For more of Mo's remarkable story read Mike's paper.

Wilson Carlile asked his team everyday "*What is in the mind of the public today?*"² (and later in his ministry asked "What will be in the mind of the public tomorrow?") Like him, we must research our contexts well to be as effective as we can be.

c) It means letting the type of person you are hoping to connect with shape what how you do church.

Some practicalities for elderly frail might include –
enabling easier access to a gathering through space for parking cars and electric scooters
ramps
softer seating
less ups and downs between hymns
hearing loop system,
large print books,
shorter services with less input and more time for quiet reflection
time to process

3rd issue – When does a mission or ministry become a fresh expression of church?

a) Why do we need to bother with the church question?

George Lings' excellent series of booklets *Encounters on the Edge* tells the story (in no.24) of a new church that was started in Edinburgh. Donald Fortune a senior Investment Funder (please note -) **nearing retirement** felt called to establish a ministry among the local business community, serving local office people, spreading Christian values and forming Christian community. They ran Alpha which proved very successful. But what was the next stage of discipleship for those who had come through Alpha and

² Great Churchmen No.2 Wilson Carlile by A E Reffold Church Book Room Press Ltd. p 27

made professions of faith? Some joined local churches but many saw the Christian community that had been begun – called *Oasis* – as their church. That's where their relationships were. That's where they could be themselves and wrestle with workplace issues relevant to them. That's where they felt at home in their own "culture". Inadvertently, a church had been planted. It is now one of the Church of Scotland's "New Charge Developments".

This is an excellent example of someone in their 60s being the pioneer of a new, creative, mission-minded community. Though *Oasis* is focused on work with those in the business community, this kind of thinking can be found in something like Thursday Rendezvous pioneered by Str Nanette Sanderson in Chesterfield. She and a team of others in the younger old age category have grown a fresh expression of church for older people who wouldn't normally come to church.

I'm sure you can all think of people who've become Christians but struggled to join a church because they just don't fit. Me for a start! Frequently the cultural gap is just too wide. How do we help them in their discipleship? What of those older people who would avoid something traditional but be interested in something that allows them to explore spirituality in a Christian context? What kinds of churches would connect with the Beatles generation? What kind of church would Mick Jagger go to if he became a Christian?

b) How does mission-minded thinking relate to the traditional church?

The church question will be more relevant for some people than others. Not all of us are called to a type of mission that will result in planting churches. Mission-shaped thinking is not to devalue very valuable traditional work that many of us do; but it invites us to new thinking of making contact with the non-churched in an effective way.

Wilson Carlile was unwaveringly loyal to the parish system but keen to find ways of seeing people come to Christ who would have been "*unobtainable by the normal parochial machinery*". This kind of thinking might well be relevant to us as we minister to those older people we have connection with through our churches while at the same time looking beyond this sphere of influence to connect with those outside our churches. It's "both/and".

c) When can we call something a fresh expression of church for older people?

The Sheffield Centre is a helpful resource for unpacking this question - here are just a few pointers:

It is a good sign if the fresh expression avoids a client provider mentality. Mission is done *by* not just *to* older people. Those that come must grow in the realisation that this is something they give to as well as receive from. Do they help decide what happens? Do those that come invite others?

Do those that help run the mission initiative (by cooking, by driving, by visiting) see it as their primary place of church? If you feel called to grow more towards being a church, having team members or volunteers that are happy to commit to the community as their first place of church will be very important instead of seeing "proper church" as happening somewhere else. If not, the feeling that the mission initiative is just an add-on or just a glorified midweek activity will be harder to shake off.

Conclusion

It can sometimes feel on the fresh expressions of church/mission-shaped church landscape that this kind of work is nothing new and many of us have been working away quietly doing good work without the need for labels. That all the marketing, money and resources go into work with children younger people and work with older people is easily eclipsed by work that appears more "trendy" or "sexy". Somehow fresh seems to equate in people's minds as young or new. We need to challenge those kinds of assumptions.

But be encouraged. We hope that by today's event, you and those you work among, will feel noticed and appreciated. This is a time of amazing opportunity. For example, as many of you know, care homes now have a responsibility to provide for the spiritual welfare as well as the physical needs of their occupants. What a fantastic opportunity for us to offer help in that context.

For the newly retired, we are actively encouraged by the Archbishop of Canterbury to dream of the kind of churches we need to create to connect with those who are beyond our doors. Anything is possible. Rowan told me, church is what happens when people come together in community to meet Jesus. So let's continue to pray and wrestle with what kinds of church we need to create, to connect with those who were movers and shakers in the 1960s.

These are exciting times, the challenge is great but God is greater. So let's pray for change, let's catch a fresh vision for mission with older people, let's dream new dreams of a transformed renewed church, for a church that's a wee bit more fun!, and let's get excited in our amazing God who makes anything and everything possible, and let's pray for our nation to be changed.

I am delighted to endorse this excellent new report, "A mission shaped church for older people" and may God bless each of you, and the churches you represent, and may he use you to build his Kingdom in the lives of older people.