

## **The Challenge of the Church in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Orkney**

What is the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Christian? What is the call for the 21<sup>st</sup> century church in Orkney, Scotland and worldwide? What are the foundations that need to be set by the church here and now to build the foundations for the 22<sup>nd</sup> century? Given the well documented figures of decline of the church in Scotland and of the Church of Scotland, how do we face up to the depressing and bleak outlook our congregations face throughout the country and in the County?

How does a rural and island landscape affect the steps that we take, to turnaround decline and can we ever again, even countenance growth? What is it that sometimes works in the cities that doesn't work here? What is it that works in the cities that *does* work here?

Why do people follow Jesus? How do people follow Jesus? What did that mean in the small and struggling networks of the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE? What did that mean in the 11<sup>th</sup> century CE and what does that mean today?

What is our understanding and experience of God? How does that manifest itself in the work (and mission) of our churches today?

What does God call us to?

What place, what action, what work, what people, what faith, what purpose, what church?

## **We are not alone**

Worldwide, the church continues to grow.

Projections by the Pew Research Centre estimate that between 2015 and 2060, Christians world-wide will *increase* in numbers from 2.276bn (31.2% of world population) to 3.054bn (31.8%). In a wider context, between the year 2015 and the year 2060, the proportion of people with a religious belief will increase from 84.0% of the world's population to 87.5%.

In other words, against popular Western perception, religious faith is increasing, and there will be proportionally fewer people with no-faith by 2060. These figures include growth in other religions too, but it does help to reflect that religious faith is the norm, and non-belief is the minority.

Geography plays a significant part in this. Much growth will take place in Asia and sub-Saharan Africa. The biggest growth is projected to be in Islam, where growth in numbers of Muslims (1.234bn) will almost be double the growth in Christians (778m).

In Europe, our experience is at odds with this. We see fewer people being born to Christian parents compared to the numbers of deaths of Christians, as the Christian population ages with fewer younger Christians to offset the trend :

- With the relatively older average age of Europe's Christian population (age 43), there were 5.6m more deaths than births (to Christians);
- Among Europe's Muslim's which have a relatively younger average age (33) there are 2.3m more births to Muslim parents, than deaths;
- The unaffiliated population in Europe has also seen more births than deaths, leading to a net increase in the unaffiliated population by 1.4m

As well as the net downward trend in the numbers of Christians in Europe, there has been a worldwide haemorrhaging in the numbers of Christians switching to non-belief. Forecasts between 2015-2020 expect that by the end of the latter half of the decade, 8.18m people with a Christian belief will leave Christianity with migration in the main to non-belief (7.57m).

These two trends towards non-belief and the decline in European numbers are probably the ones that we see closest in the United Kingdom, Scotland and Orkney, and can affect our outlook negatively.

But globally, belief is growing, and Christian belief is growing.

## **The ONS Basket and our changing society – A challenge to change**

Corned Beef, Condensed milk, Linoleum, the Cassette tape, Salad Cream, Smash instant potato, Cinzano, the VHS Video recorder, the Sat Nav.

All of the above have one thing in common. They are all former members of the ONS “Basket of Goods” used to calculate Inflation in the UK, and at some point between 1940 and 2015, they were considered “normal” purchased made by the UK Consumer.

Any photograph of the high street of towns and cities of the UK from the past is a lesson in change. The iconic, opening scene of *Trainspotting*, the 1996 Danny Boyle film of Irvine Welsh’s critically acclaimed foul mouthed opus on the underclass of Scotland’s capital is impossible to revisit today. Ewan McGregor’s Mark Renton pounding out of John Menzies in Edinburgh’s Princes Street can never be recreated as John Menzies has left our high streets, as has Woolworth’s, Wimpy, BHS, C&A, Athena, Comet, Littlewoods Department Stores, Esselmont and Macintosh, and Virgin Megastore.

No-one can shop in Templeton’s, Presto, Safeway or Fine Fare anymore.

All these brands have disappeared for various specific reasons, but in general terms, society moved on. We stopped eating Corned Beef, we started to seek a more wholesome diet that the instant mashed potato didn’t square with, the CD replaced the cassette, and Leonard Rossiter’s TV adverts for Cinzano became a cultural history as tastes changed.

But Lidl, Tesco, Waitrose, Aldi and Morrison’s continue in the same marketplace.

Starbucks, Café Nero and Costa all continue to dominate the High Street but 30 years ago none of these brands had any presence in the UK. Established Fast Food chains like McDonalds who were around have transformed their image and offering to maintain a significant foothold.

In Orkney, we have lost a long list of shops, restaurants and venues. Locations that were popular in the 1980s, such as The Quoyburray Inn, now sit empty. But restaurants, bars and café’s such as The Old Library & Sound Archive, The Reel, The Willows Café, Lucano’s and Helgi’s have opened in these past two decades and some of these venues thrive.

Others have been less successful, or have had to change to survive. Chicken George has come and gone. Casablanca and Matchmakers are no longer the go-to venues of the 1970’s and 1980’s Orcadian night out, and even Fusion has reduced its openings, adapting to a different marketplace.

It can be argued, that the secret to staying ever-present is to be ever-changing. The places that are popular now have not succeeded by luck, but by understanding what the marketplace that they are operating within *is*. They identify a need, a niche, and in so doing they deliver a product that is liked, that is sometimes loved, by locals, by tourists, by both.

What relevance does this have for the Church? Isn’t God never-changing?

Absolutely, but the practice of faith is never-constant. The Old Testament practice of worship constantly adapted to sustain God's People. Abram's call to go and leave his homeland saw him leave modern-day Iraq, and Joseph led God's people in time of famine to settle in Egypt. Egypt worked, but only for a time, and then it turned sour. Moses led God's people out of oppression and into the desert, and 40 years of nomadic wandering. But that time brought manna from Heaven, and Ten Commandments from the mountain. Joshua established God's people in the Holy Land but this led to the good and the bad of the Two Kingdoms before ultimately the Exile and the Prophets led worship from First to Second temple and the Roman Occupation.

Then Jesus came.

After Pentecost, the early church grappled with leadership, liturgy and location and Paul led the mission of the church into the gentile areas of Western Rome and Eastern Constantinople.

Through 2000 years since the establishment of the church, our method and practice of Christian worship had adapted and adopted to the social norms and the social mores of the communities in which the church has dwelt over 20 distinct centuries in 100s of countries and in as many forms of Christian worship and practice that could be imagined.

Expressions of Christian Worship have ranged from Gregorian chant to 21<sup>st</sup> Century American Mega-Churches with TV & Internet outputs than more often than not have left much to be desired. We have seen the rise of Roman Catholic faith, the Eastern Orthodox Church and the legacy of both of these include gigantic cathedrals that dominate the cities of Europe. The reformation, the Scottish Covenanters, the anabaptists have all found expressions of Christian Worship, Belief and Practice that are so distinct from the post-Pauline congregations of 2<sup>nd</sup> century Philippi would be utterly lost in the monastic rhythms of Inchcolm or in the Presbyterian pews amongst the 19<sup>th</sup> century Church of Scotland's Calvinists.

But across this wide and diverse spectrum of faith and practice, the Kingdom of God has in myriad different expressions transformed the lives of people and society, bringing seismic social and cultural change. It has found its place in innumerably diverse communities and even in contexts of persecution it has thrived as through all of these lenses - for these congregations – Jesus came.

## **Lessons we can learn from those around us**

Our challenge in 21<sup>st</sup> century Orkney is to understand the community in which we dwell and to develop a relevant, authentic, efficient and attractive practice of Christian practice, belief and worship that bears integrity both to the Gospel and to the people of Orkney.

To achieve this we need to both know God and know the community. While many evangelicals would proclaim the former as “the key to growth”, (and I don’t in anyway seek to diminish this, but equally I don’t want to patronise those that know this well) it is in fact when congregations forget how to do the latter that they struggle, and when they understand the community that they are trying to reach that they start to see growth.

The successful businesses in Orkney’s commercial marketplace have not all followed the same model. Not every popular eating experience is the high-end fine dining found in the Foveran. Sometimes people want a good bar-meal, a decent curry, a fish-supper, or just a homely tea-shop. Sometimes all they want is a decent bacon roll or a burger from the van with the queue in the car park. But in all of these cases, they have in some way or other delivered a quality and authenticity or value, that is attractive within the community.

And in all of these places are found people with a physical hunger, which combined with their social experience, their aspirations, their economics, their “taste” leads some to book The Foveran, some to visit the fish-shop and some to just cook at home after a visit to the Frozen Food Centre.

*These same people are the people that the church is desperately trying to, and often failing to reach.*

Do these same people have no spiritual hunger? Does the 21<sup>st</sup> century community of Orkney have no need for the Gospel? Is it too busy, too sceptical, too faithless and too disinterested? Is there no hunger for God any more?

In London in 2013, Sanderson Jones and Pippa Evans founded the Sunday Assembly, a meeting, like a church, but for people with no religious belief who didn’t want a religious meeting, but still wanted a meeting as a space in a busy week to stop, and to reflect, to think of the bigger picture, without having to “do God”. The success of this both a sad reflection on the failings of the church in Britain and an inspiration that even in some of the most atheist peoples, there is still evidence of a hunger for something “of the church”, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century post-faith London.

In Edinburgh there are at least three major growth churches. Charlotte Chapel has recently left its Rose Street building for a new larger venue, Morningside Baptist Church has relocated to the former Methodist Central Hall in Tollcross and Saint Pauls and Saint George’s Episcopal congregation has undergone a major refurbishment to adapt to its large congregation and broad outlook.

But within the Church of Scotland also, there are examples of expanding and thriving congregations bucking the trend of decline. In some cases, these congregations have made

seismic changes to adapt and to attract, but in others they have worked hard to retain aspects of their heart and heritage. But none have stood still.

While growth has often been in the evangelical church, the evangelical church has not held a complete monopoly on growth. The emergence of the Emergent Church worldwide has cultivated an understanding of Christian faith and practice that squares well against the challenges of a postmodern world and brought long-established liturgy and practice into today's society in a way that complements conservative Christianity without competing with it. For some congregations a "shift to the right" may seem the obvious way forward, but this is not the only way forward.

Indeed, Orkney is well served with conservative, traditional and fundamentalist worship, with three Baptist congregations, two Brethren groups and at least one independent charismatic Pentecostal fellowship.

But while these expressions of Christian faith can often have enviable numbers and enviable age profiles, they have a monopoly neither of people nor of younger people. Evangelical Christianity, Presbyterian Christianity, Liberal/Emergent Christianity and Orthodox Christianity are all expressions of people's faith in one Lord, one God because we are all people of unique character and background.

Therefore, we should perceive that just as the evangelical churches appeal to the young evangelicals, there are too young, socially aware, politically driven people who would more naturally find their place in God in contemporary forms of worship which the evangelical congregations do not normally explore. Forms of worship that don't necessarily happen as "11am Church services", but forms of worship nonetheless.

## But who is my neighbour?

But what is our community? How well do we understand it?

21<sup>st</sup> Century Orkney is a world away from 20<sup>th</sup> Century Orkney:

- We still farm, but farming now is driven with technology and science, pushing for higher and higher efficiencies, greater and greater yields. Cattle breeding is carefully planned, with artificial insemination the norm; livestock health and welfare is crucially important and carefully monitored. Yet amongst the science, it is still the air and pasture that makes Orkney Beef a gold standard desired by kitchens across and beyond our boundaries. Farming has seared the Orcadian landscape but it is pressured, lonely, struggling calling that demands focus, organisation, awareness and application of compelling standards and sits at the time of writing on the precipice of the impacts of a no-deal Brexit and a potentially disastrous funding gap. On the blackest of winter nights, how does the church in Orkney stand alongside a farmer?
- We still fish, but most Orkney fish are farmed Salmon. Here too, an industry has developed on science and technology, not to produce quantity, but again, quality. Our shellfish output too is highly sought after – be it Scapa Flow Langoustines, Brown Crab or Orkney Scallops. The church was founded with the help of ex fisherman, the church in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century found a clear mandate to support fisherman, but what relevant ways can churches support fisherman who spend long periods at sea, away from their families, who almost flip between nuclear family and lone parents with constant rhythms. While our deep sea fishing industry has diminished, the same challenges face our offshore families where parts of our community are on two weeks on/two weeks off for oil and gas. What is the churches offering in serving these communities?
- Tourism plays a huge part in the Orkney economy, most visibly with the arrival of the huge cruise ships but also via the more traditional approaches to tourism. Orkney welcomed over 170,000 visitors in 2017, not counting the approximate 113,000 cruise liner passengers who arrived in the county. Many of these visitors have time to spend but what precisely are their spiritual needs and where does the church in Orkney see an opportunity to engage with over a quarter of a million different people? What pastoral, worship or faith needs do these people have, and how can we engage with them as part of our congregations?
- Orkney is a world renowned centre of excellence in renewable and offshore technologies. It attracts expertise in these sectors of a high calibre, who work in challenging environments and sometimes under the uncertainty of funding models that make it challenging to plan long term. Yet still people come from all over the UK and Europe, and notwithstanding the potential damaging consequence of Brexit, these people are setting up lives far from home, far from family and in the unfamiliar unique cultural setting of Orkney. What are the practical and spiritual needs of the

newcomer professionals in the science and technology circuits that have moved to Orkney?

- Our biggest employer is the Public Sector, and there are areas of positive engagement here to be recognised - the church has a visible pastoral presence in the Health Service, and the place of the Cathedral and other churches in major significant civic commemorations has seen positive engagement in high profile and highly visible ways in Jutland, Hampshire, Remembrance and even the recent commemorations of the innocent victims of the witchcraft trials. But in the day to day operations of the councils frontline services, is there a role for congregations in meeting the needs of people that the public sector is now struggling to fund services to support? In terms of Policing, the Street Pastors initiative has made clear and measurable impacts in providing care and calm to closing time.
- Finally, the lessons of the success stories of our hospitality and retail sectors already covered earlier, the one thing we should take is that in these fields are people with an excellent sense of how to deliver quality and an understanding of the marketplace in which they operate. How do people skilled in these areas see excellence and authenticity in the local church?

These examples are only a fraction of the communities in which we seek to reach and engage with. In these communities are people with gifts and talents that will help to serve and sustain the church in its current struggles for resources, and without whose involvement we see the struggle and decline in our current congregations and ministries.

## **A crisis and an opportunity**

The opportunity exists for our churches to reinvent themselves into congregations that are sustainable and able to support the changes that will still need to be made in how ministry is delivered to cope with the current shortages in pastors and ministers and to continue the legacy on which our local Parish churches were founded, but standing still is not an option. Retaining the forms and orders of worship which worked in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century fails to understand that these only worked because they were different to forms and orders of worship that had been practiced in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Therefore today, we need to develop in our Christian worship and practice a way of doing our faith that is authentic to 21<sup>st</sup> century Orkney.

This is not a call to choose “new upbeat” tunes and bring in guitars and drums; but it is a suggestion to lose the aspects of our worship that no longer connects and no longer has authenticity. Our congregations have an attachment to “traditional Church of Scotland” worship and they value it highly, but should it be maintained and is it a barrier to growth?

This is not a call to move all the churches to the evangelical conservative “right”; but it is a suggestion to discern how we position our faith in Christ and seek to establish the Kingdom of God in 21<sup>st</sup> century Orkney, and be bold in our belief.

This is not a call to decorate the foyer and believe we have a job done, but it is a suggestion that we rearchitect our activities to meet the community in which we worship and who we long to bless.

But what it is, fundamentally, is a challenge to change. Change is ever-present in the Biblical Narrative but paradoxically is one of the most difficult things for churches to accept.

Kenny MacPherson