

The Dear Old C of E?

East Window, April 2000

The difficulty for the Christian Church is *not* that nobody is interested in religion any more – they are! It's just that people can't see the connection between the faith we cherish and the institution. It's nothing like as bad as the press make out of course, but it's still a question we must address. Why an institution?

Well, first of all, by definition you can't be a Christian by yourself. Jesus called a *group* together, despite the problems they caused him, and exhorted them to live together despite their differences. But being together in our differences we have to find ways of living together and that's why the C of E has democratic systems built into our decision making. This means plenty of give and take which makes the Church creak a bit, but it allows us to follow the earliest tradition as a Church open to a rich variety of disciples.

Second, the Church is not here just to offer pleasant religious wispy feelings to its members. That is the false 'spirituality' we see in many of the 'spirit books' in the high-street booksellers. We are here to worship God and to witness to God's love in realistic ways at every level of society, with eyes wide open to the world's problems. And for that we have to organise to get things done. So, an organisation is what it takes.

So the Church became an organisation - but in recent years the C of E has found itself more and more hemmed in by laws and institutionalised ways of doing things which were helpful yesterday but which are ridiculous today. We must listen to the criticism and find new ways of being Church for the new millennium. So...

First, we must jettison everything which stops us holding fast to the all-important encounter with the Almighty. Our Church organisation must allow us and not hamper us from being *with God*. Second, we must be openly loving and inclusive, just as God's Word bids us. God accepts us and loves us – so we must accept and love one another. No more bickering! We must be generous to all, for the C of E is only one part of the *Universal Church* of God –no one denomination nor group within it has the monopoly on the truth! Third, we must follow Jesus, and the prophets before him, in upholding God's option for the poor and 'those who are heavy-laden'. We are here to *serve*.

So organisation yes, but institutionalisation, no. The C of E must learn to 'travel light' for the new millennium and not be held back by its own historical accretions. The miracle is that even though the forces of conservatism are very strong, I see in the dear old Co E sacrificial groups in parishes everywhere offering wonderful service to God and their neighbours. They must be helped and not hindered by 'the system'. For if the Church seeks to save its own life it will lose it. If it chooses to give itself away, God will richly bless it for the new millennium.

+Laurie Bradwell