

A Vast Minority: Church and mission in a Plural Culture

Stuart Murray. Paternoster, 2015

315AD: possibly 10% of Roman Empire were Christian & rising.

2017: 10% GB. 6million committed followers, of 60m & dropping.

2011 census data: 59% designate Christian of which 22% over 65. 86% white. 60% economically inactive. Of these some aspirational nominalists, others ethnic Christians from heritage of patriotic allegiance.

87% no belief in personal god, 70% no theistic belief at all. 20% as 'spiritual' (UCL research).

Of 18-24 years YouGov in 2013, 28% said Christian but only 25% believed in God, another 19% believed in a Spiritual power.

Grace Davie in 2000 said many believe without belonging, but no longer believe? Pentecostals (and some Orthodox) growing because of immigration etc.

Church attendance down to 5.5% in 2013, but difficult to define nowadays.

Many denominations in decline. CofE only one third of attenders. Parochial system defunct. Some vibrant most moribund.

2: moving into minority status is new for us.

Many do not believe we were ever 'Christian' just nominal without missional stance. But influence pervasive!! Youngsters have only seen minority church. Other faiths used to it, but we don't believe it. Some 'fresh expressions' change format not ethos.

Majority religions (even atheism) persecute others.

Atheists feel as minority oppressed as we do and respond similarly: defensively.

Jews and Muslims have survived by emphasising distinctive identity & belief.

Will Muslims become majority by 2035? Or secularists?

Instructions for minority Christians in NT

NT all written to minority Church. Aliens and Exiles in 1 Peter (but addressed to diaspora) NT talks of First Fruits, little flock, pilgrim people. No guidance on how to transition from majority to minority. OT shows state majority goes into decline. But Church repeated mistake. The Babylonian Exile is helpful: Habakkuk and Lamentations. Would Deuteronomist interpret our decline in same way?? Or maybe it's God gracious liberation of us from the past?

Jeremiah 29: settle down and learn to live faithfully in new context. Not vengeance but welfare of city. Our fortunes interwoven with wellbeing of wider society (v7) All this rather than criticise from side-lines or withdraw into selves. Period of creativity!

3. Adjusting and Embracing

David could not walk in Saul's armour so changed rules of engagement. We have vast resources but squander them in duplication, nostalgia and status seeking. Struggling to keep status quo through cuts and minor adjustments so we can keep edifice up.

Volunteering no longer carries kudos and many of roles not necessary. Move from being fire-fighters to arsonists as a movement or network. Do fewer more strategic things more effectively? Avoid burn-out by not re-inventing quangos to run network. 1.6 million CofE volunteers for community cohesion and care, higher than populous.

We have tremendous numbers for mission but energies absorbed by institution.

Expectations? Unrealistic privileges – bishops in Lords, charity tax help, schools support, national coverage. Penalising poor offers new opportunities to serve world. Revival was based on people 'returning' to faith – no longer tenable. We must not hanker after the old Jerusalem says Jeremiah. And society will mistrust us because of moral inconsistency and muddled attitudes, so does not listen to good reportage. So we will require patient sowing and watering.

Temptations:

Nostalgia, Defensiveness, Defeatism, Self-importance, Resentment, Scaremongering (persecution complex). Arrogance, Monologue, Moralizing, Special pleading, Belligerence, Silence.

Embracing minority status:

It is not for you to know the times the father has set. We should welcome our new liminal place, having less power and influence.

4. Sustaining and Resourcing

A less institutional, simpler form of Church. Christian identity is paramount. Our lifestyles should be shaped by faith, "to live in such a way that our life would not make sense if God did not exist". Biblical literacy, and resourcing for week. We are catechized daily by adverts so cultural discipline.

Becoming Human: Imago Dei:

Culture tries to dehumanise us: 'human resources' are people! The humanity of Jesus needs stressing – the image of God in human flesh. 'Becoming human' language saves us from over-spiritualising discipleship.

Whole-life Discipleship: Missio Dei

The big story of the Bible. Your Kingdom come. Churches must discern local mission within this overarching goal. Need to be more intentional disciples. Sermons must call for action and participation, not just passive listening (I am the Way). High accountability and low control, with regular theological reflection on the action.

Critiquing culture: questioning Mammon. In our homes too. Ecological living.

5. A Creative Minority

A minority is always compelled to think! Not to maintain status or control. No longer an 'un-churched' or 'churched'. Alpha is too cerebral and propositional, and expects them to come to us – not incarnational. Fresh expressions: contextual, missional, but how do they relate to old expressions? Will these expressions be absorbed by 'proper' church? Perhaps it's all more critical than these initiatives pretend? Mixed economy says old ethos is fine for some. Theologians must engage with non-theologians and non-Christians and get out of their box.

Reading Bible from Margins:

Pounds – buries his pound and refuses involvement with banking. Rich young man is not focus of story it is the sharing with the poor? Mustard seed makes big bush underground – not a big powerful church. Again, not all societies are guilt cultures as was Christendom, so we are liberated to look again at what Jesus offers. What is good news for the abused?

6. A Prophetic Ministry

Church is not the sender but the sent. Incarnation means: living the issues locally, acknowledging God already there, Relationships at heart, with rather than for, and in relational groups. Mission as two way, open ended. Yeast in lump, in vernacular. Promoting Peace by restorative justice, deploying non-violently in conflict zones. Disagreeing well. Instead of pontificating moralistically to ask 'what if?' To engage in patient evangelism borne on the back of an overtly integrated Christian life-style. Partnerships become essential and transformative of all, within consistent

engagement – but not as gap-fillers unless it raises the issues. Local credibility above pronouncements.

7 A Hopeful Minority

Asking ‘what if?’ engenders hope. Rather than obsess about our future, obsess about changing the world for the better. Settle in (stabilitas) and sink roots. Not a blame but thankful approach. This challenging style will require courage (the requirement for the minority) but see what minorities have done (Cadbury in Bham). Reverse mission can import back to UK the worst elements of what we sent!