

Pass the Butter!

Juliet Kilpin

What is church? Now there's a question! It's one that is frequently asked by those trying to get to grips with what it is to be relevant, missional communities of God's people in today's society. It is a question that we asked when we had the opportunity to plant a church with an Urban Expression team. Faced with a virtual blank piece of paper we began to ponder the negotiables and non-negotiables of church. It was a wonderfully life-giving process, whilst at the same time feeling like a huge responsibility to get these foundations right.

Playing at Church

As the years have gone by we have often reflected on our progress and wondered if we have arrived yet at this thing called 'church'. We still have no building of our own and never meet on a Sunday morning. We have no sermons and never take offerings. We have no manse and pay no stipend. We have no deacons or 'official' church membership. Some, I know, look at our way of being a community of Jesus' followers and wonder when we are going to become a 'proper' church. One rather senior person in church life recently suggested to me that this church planting malarkey was just 'playing at church' and that at some point Jim and I should really knuckle down to the bread and butter of ministry and pastor a real church. And I find myself asking what a real church is actually like.

I have been avidly reading Michael Frost's new book *Exiles: Living Missionally in a Post-Christian Culture*, and I find myself identifying with much of what he writes. In it he suggests that there is this chasm within which many followers find themselves. They are not comfortable in their host culture which is post-Christian/evangelical/commitment blah, blah, blah. But neither are they comfortable in the church culture that is available. They find that the two cultures are so disconnected with one another that they simply fall between them into this void of exile.

A Community of Exiles

Frost suggests that many of these exiles have probably had some experience of what they have considered a 'real' expression of church, probably on short-term mission projects or community service initiatives. Here they have sensed the genuine connection between their faith and the real world; the depth of realism, relationship and 'communitas' shared in a team; the intensity of trust placed in God in a situation of risk and potential failure. These people often return to their church and enthusiastically beseech the congregation to take more risks and become more missional. Some churches respond. Others, suggests Frost, find their emerging exiles becoming increasingly frustrated and perhaps end up waving them off to parachurch organisations or to the clutches of the waiting world. I am convinced that many of those who have joined Urban Expression teams are indeed exiles who have found a way of making connections between church and society by creating new forms of church through an initiative which demands sacrifice, hard work, offers freedom to experiment but faces the real risk of failure.

'But', suggests Frost, 'they have been fed the lie that these liminal, missional experiences aren't really the *stuff* of church. They are sidelines, outreach activities of the genuine article', (page 130). 'Real' church, we have often been told, is still something we are supposedly working towards. So why is it that when I look at so

many 'proper' churches with all the 'correct' structures and programmes I cannot imagine being involved in anything other than this risky, earthy, fluid, missional form of church? Why can't I imagine knuckling down and getting on with the 'bread and butter of ministry in a proper church'? Why do I shudder at the thought of chairing heated discussions about the choice of songs we sing and the medium through which we sing them, the temperature of the heating system, the advantages of pews to chairs and the latest stipend increases?

What *did* Jesus do?

Does it boil down to the difference between *doing* mission and *being missional*? I wonder? Are we guilty of having fed our churches the lie that mission is something special we do – something on the sidelines and edge of church life rather than intrinsically part of our twenty-four hour, seven day a week life? I have often pondered the question of whether Jesus ever did any mission? Sure he often went purposefully to places, notably to Jerusalem at the end of his earthly life. But often he seemed to be meandering around simply taking hold of the opportunities that arose around him – a meal here, a picnic there, a boat journey here and a chat with a prostitute there. Was this mission, or was Jesus just being....er...Jesus?

I heard it suggested once that Jesus didn't practise mission, but instead did 'wasism'. Jesus didn't *do* mission, Jesus just *was*, and in his context of simply 'being' took hold of whatever opportunities prevailed upon him and made them missional moments. How can we enable our churches to ponder this concept and how can we equip them to explore this further and ultimately to live it out?

Imagine

I am impressed by the work that the London Institute of Contemporary Christianity is doing on this subject with their Imagine Project. There is a useful DVD available from them which the BUGB Mission Department is sending to each of our churches to inspire and resource them. They also run courses helping people to make connections between their spiritual lives and their lives of work, home, family, neighbourhood or college. Their work suggests that becoming missional churches is more about developing a mindset and an attitude which sees mission as part of everyday life. Yes it is about activity and it is about creating intentional opportunities through which we can share something of Jesus, and initiatives such as Hope 08 will be encouraging churches to create such opportunities in their neighbourhoods. But it is more than this. When Hope 08 is finished it will not be sufficient for churches to sit back and say that they have 'done their bit of mission'. Instead, I look forward to how Hope 08 might help produce a change of attitude in congregations which go on to see themselves as groups of believers who are constantly missional throughout their day to day lives.

This for me would indeed be 'proper church'! And if equipping believers to become missional people is, in fact, the 'bread and butter' of church, then let me pass you the knife, because that is certainly what planting a church has been about here in East London.

Resources for further study:

M Frost, 'Exiles; Living Missionally in a Post-Christian Culture', Hendrickson, 2006

www.licc.org.uk/imagine

www.hope08.com