

Klaus Teschner Lecture

Changing patterns of evangelism in the last decade

15 years or so ago I was invited by Westphalia to join a team of 25 people from outside to come and look carefully at its life and make recommendations for possible change. In 1983 the English diocese of Leicester also invited about 25 guests from around the world to help it.

I was one of them. As we met together for the first time I was very struck by a handsome and elegant figure from Germany. I also discovered that he was thoughtful and friendly, and able to put forward his point of view with clarity. His name was Klaus Teschner. 35 years later we are still friends. Klaus we rejoice that you have been able to join us today after your long period of illness.

Klaus has asked me to speak on 'Changing patterns of evangelism in the last decade'. Klaus is clever – he has narrowed me down to what has happened in the last ten years – not fifty years past.

I can talk best about what we are seeing in England – but we have always found that what happens in the UK happens 15 years later in Germany. (well, except Brexit – the most foolish thing we have done since we let the French beat us at the Battle of Hastings in 1066: I still have my hopes that it will never happen, but that is another story!).

I offer you our recent experiments.

Why make any changes in the life of the church at all?

Because the context in which we take the gospel is changing with a rapidity which is breathtaking. When the gospel moves into a new context there are always parts to be kept and bits to be discarded. We can see the process in the New Testament. The heart of the Gospel was further defined and thought through but some of the surroundings from the womb of its Jewish background were discarded. And there was a great deal of discussion and anger as to which bits were to be kept and with thrown overboard: see the Synod of Acts 15. What about circumcision ... meat dedicated to idols ... keeping the Sabbath?

And now we are moving into a new context. Three obvious examples -

1.(PHONE) With this I can text my friend in Nepal, I can find out the population of Turkmenistan, and get the latest football scores. And this has social consequences. Largely because of this 2 UK pubs are closing every day- people now socialise on the internet or in a coffee shop. It is said that modern young people only possess a tablet and a duvet – they can't afford to buy a house and they have no books to carry around. One graduate told me she had got a good degree without looking at a book made of paper. Our young people have changed. 20% never touch alcohol. Some hardly ever leave the house – they can get all they need without going through the front door. How are they going to hear the gospel? Does our normal Sunday morning church speak to those who spend many hours a day looking at a screen?

2. Ravi Zacharias said 'How do you reach a generation that listens with its eyes and thinks with its feelings?'. Some say people who voted for Trump – or Brexit - are old and ignorant.

But I wonder if these people have a better grasp of how the future will be. They know that people nowadays respond to headlines and emotion. The people who Jesus spoke to were largely illiterate and yet 'they heard him gladly'. Is our gospel too cerebral, too many words. How do we communicate to a Trump/Brexit population? Do we count intellectual respectability more important than effective evangelism? Do we need to proclaim bold but accurate headlines rather than be too concerned by the small print?

3. Have you bought your last car powered by petrol or diesel? When will your car drive itself – my son-in-law who tests new drivers so they can get a licence thinks he might be out of a job within ten years. Will robots operate on me if I get gallstones? Will libraries soon have more screens than books? Will cooking in the future only need a pair of scissors to open the packets? Life changes and we should expect the church to do likewise.

Different contexts means different ways of doing things.

Just to go quickly through the changes which we have seen in evangelism.

In the 1980s in the UK we realised that the big meeting with the big speaker no longer brought large numbers of people to faith. Billy Graham came but the results were not the same as when he came earlier.

In the 1990s we realised that the small discussion group was the most effective means to bring people to faith. Such courses as Alpha and Emmaus were the main means of evangelising. Church services became more relaxed, new music was sung and a more informal approach was encouraged (even if some canon law was broken in the process). This led to the question: 'If people come to faith is a normal one hour Sunday service the right pattern of worship and teaching to help these friends and disciples to grow in the faith? Often the answer was 'No'. Often they have little knowledge of the bible, of hymns and printed prayers, of the way people behave in church. I have been to Germany many, many times and when the music of the hymn begins I still tend to leap to my feet.

In the 2000s we went further – we began to question the pattern of church we had inherited. 'What really is Church? Some churches had already experimented with 'church planting' – starting a new congregation by sending out a group of people to become church in an area. Sometimes there were only a few pioneers, sometimes there were as many as fifty – nearly all volunteers, though sometimes there was an ordained man or woman as leader. Sometimes they took over a church which had died or was nearly dead, at other times they met in a pub, or like one near me in an auctioneer's showrooms. Books began to be written about these experiments: especially significant was 'Church Planting: Laying the Foundations' by Stuart Murray published in 1998. Bishops and other church leaders became aware of these experiments in which parishes were trying to take the Gospel to those who had little or no knowledge. Sometimes they had to answer difficult questions about church law and where the new projects fitted into a parish structure. At the same time the leaders became aware of the dynamism, commitment, and, often, growth of church plants. They decided they wanted to look at them, learn from them and evaluate them. A report 'Mission-shaped Church' (translated into German as 'Wie Gemeinde über sich hinauswächst') was produced in 2006. Its ideas and suggestions were accepted by our General Synod. I have been a pastor for 50 years. I have never known the Church of England move so fast. It is like a tortoise smelling a pile of lettuce 50 metres away – a bit clumsy but surprisingly fast. And the lettuce leaf is a new form of national church – one which brings together the traditional Sunday worship and

the new forms of being church: what a former Archbishop of Canterbury called a 'mixed economy'. The new has leapt out of our church buildings, often worships on another day than Sunday, has different patterns of training for clergy, uses money for mission rather than maintenance. Clergy and laity are now specially trained as 'pioneers' to start new initiatives.

Notice that this is not top-down – bishops and superintendants telling parishes what to do. It was the leadership of the church seeing what was going on at the grass-roots, evaluating it and then recommending it to the whole church. The right process.

The Report used the term 'fresh expression of Church' for these experiments and defined it as, '*a form of church for our changing culture established primarily for the benefit of people who are not members of any church*'. Interestingly this definition came out of a preliminary conference held between the leaders of both the Church of England and the Methodist church – other British denominations are looking at this way of mission and many church plants are ecumenical.

Church planting is not a new idea – after all every church and every congregation in Germany must have begun some time – even if it was a thousand years ago. Cities have expanded and new churches are built to serve the new population. Many years ago I and my wife started a church in a new town near London – but there was only the two of us (and a baby). Our goal was to build a church which would follow the traditional pattern.

Today is different. The aim of a church plant is evangelistic - as the definition says they are established '*primarily for the benefit of people who are not members of any church*'

A church which starts a church plant should have three things.

1. a desire to go out and 'make disciples ... baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit' and therefore is prepared to lose some of its members to start a new church.

2. Church members who are prepared to adventure personally by leaving one church to start another.

3. Some authority from a bishop or other church leadership. Sometimes they join a failing church with a small congregation, but often meet in premises which are rented or borrowed. One in a village near me meets in a barn with the congregation sitting in a circle on straw bales.

Some churches have sent out groups several times. One famous church in London, called Holy Trinity Brompton, has given away 60 groups over the last twenty years – many hundreds of its congregation have left to form new churches – and each one is given 55000 euros to help the start. Despite all this giving away it now has about 3 ½ thousand members attending. '*give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back.*'

Quite a number of these plants have themselves grown and in turn have sent out groups to form new churches. The growth of these churches has been impressive. The HTB plants have grown on average by 257%. One team in Bournemouth started with 11 adults, 3 children and a baby. It now has an attendance of 500 of which 200 are under 20. Their ministry includes help for those leaving prison and drug addicts.

Obviously there are questions:

1. What about the parish system. As in Germany every inch of the country is ministered to by a parish church. Some church plants are from the parish church into a distant part of the parish. But in most cases church plants leap over parish walls. Here the structure of the church helps. Bishops and their staff can negotiate with existing parishes and the leaders affected and help to steer money into mission. They can support and encourage. Most dioceses in England are seeing the church structures as a help to mission and now half of any money from central funds must go to help mission, often by grants to churches which are beginning to plant. The canon law of the Church of England has had to be adjusted by General Synod to make some of these changes legal with what is called the Extra Parochial Ministry Measure.
2. Starting a church plant requires cooperation between the bishop, the other churches in the area and the team who are leading the church plant. Often the Bishop will issue a Bishop's Mission Order which will help to show that the new plant is officially part of the Church of England and also sidesteps certain legal requirements – for example we had a rule that a church should have a service on a Sunday, but many church plants don't. BMOs *'affirm, enable, encourage and support a new mission initiative within the overall ordering of the life of the Church'*.
3. The worship in these plants is nearly always more relaxed than in a traditional church. There will be a lot of modern songs and movement and sermons will often use visual aids and modern presentations and a limited liturgical framework. More traditional people like me will want more silence and prayer but we have to understand that these services are for beginners. Think of a swimming pool with a shallow end and a deep end. In the shallow end there are a lot of people and a good deal of splashing and noise as beginners play and begin to enjoy water as they learn to swim. Only later will they venture into the deep end. A lot of our worship in England is too deep end – excellent for those who can swim but not helpful for those who have never worshipped God before, who do not know the Bible and who do not know the 'routine' of a church. We have learnt from these church plants that there are far more people who will join us if we introduce them to shallow end worship than if we ask them to jump in the deep end without being able to swim. The important factor for the future is that those in the shallow end are taught how to swim in the deep end. Nearly all the church plants in England use nurture groups like Alpha or Emmaus to help people to learn about the content of the faith and they will be encouraged to join a small group of fellow learners who meet regularly.
4. In most of these plants there will be a great reliance upon the work of the Holy Spirit for guidance and empowerment and they will try to be founded upon prayer. In a recent survey most of these new churches described themselves as 'charismatic evangelical' but very few indeed are narrow in theology or practice.
5. Many see themselves as being 'neighbourhood' or 'community' churches which seek to engage with and help local social and personal issues. Often they begin with a social enterprise. Many churches have a food bank which distributes food and help to the poor and refugees – and instead of inviting people to come to church they begin a church plant made up of the people who use the food bank. One of my daughters belongs to one of these churches. Her son is disabled and it has been excellent in welcoming and making him part of the congregation.
6. The leaders of these church plants are usually entrepreneurs. They are people who take initiatives. One writer said that they should be
 - a. Dissatisfied – unhappy with things as they are

- b. Visionary – looking to the future and prepared to change
- c. Hopeful – reliant on the guidance and empowerment of God for the future
- d. Risk-takers – they have ‘permission to fail’. Timothy was told ‘for God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline’. (2 Tim 1.7). I have to say since this became part of the job-description for clergy the number of people coming forward for ordination has grown by a fifth – half of them women.

I have to be realistic. Not all church plants work out well. It is like the parable of the sower. Some fall on stony ground and never get going; some fall on shallow ground and, after a good start, wither and die, some get entangled in difficulties and just about keep going. But the majority of the seed falls on good ground and produces 30fold, 60fold, even a 100fold. That is the multiplication table of the Kingdom – the farmers Jesus spoke to would have been glad to get tenfold.