

New challenges for the 21st century Church with special regard to the established Churches of the Nordic countries

“Of Issachar, those who had understanding of the times, to know what Israel ought to do”, 1 Chronicles 12,32

A. Changing World! – Changing Church?

A New Age? - what is particularly new?

Many are focusing today on the great changes in the societies and culture of our time, the obvious decline of the established protestant churches of Europe, and the need for radical changes in these churches if they are to have a future.

Cf. **Alister E. McGrath**, *The Future of Christianity*, Blackwell Manifestos, Oxford 2002
Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom. The Coming of Global Christianity*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2002
Michael Moynagh, *Changing World, Changing Church. New forms of Church. Out-of-the-pew thinking. Initiatives that work*, London 2001

Seven areas of certain importance:

1. ***The obvious change in culture***, “postmodernism”, intuition and emotions more important than reason and science.

What is truth? The homo mensura principle: What feels right for me, is right.

How does the church react to the marginalisation of Christian principles and values, in the public debate? The new state of liminality?

The term *liminality* is being used in Sociology of Religion in order to describe a situation which occurs when a group, or an institution, which has been very central and important in a certain social or cultural context becomes marginalised. As are the churches in Europe, and to some extent in Northern America, today. Cf. **Alan Roxburgh**, *Missionary Congregation, Leadership and Liminality*, Valley Forge 1997. Three kinds of reactions seem to be possible in such a situation:

1. The church tries to regain her position and respect by adapting to the prevalent culture.
2. The church isolates herself in order to protect her identity and purity.
3. The church seeks radical renewal in order to regain her original strength and vitality in the power of the Holy Spirit. She becomes conscious of her function as a *counter culture*, as *light and salt*, and is not afraid to provoke the predominant culture and political correct standpoints, cf. **Graham Tomlin**, *The Provocative Church*, London 2002.

The *crisis in communication* between the churches and the younger generation. The traditional, liturgical worship-services do not touch the heart or feelings of the young.

There is an obvious need for worship services that communicate at all levels (body, soul, spirit and mind); *holistic worship?*

2. ***The religious pluralism***. The classical world religions, aggressive Islam – various new mixtures, reincarnation, old paganism revitalised. Is the spirituality of the traditional churches too shallow for those who are serious seekers? Again, a need for *holistic spirituality*.
3. ***The breakdown of old family patterns and social networks***. Loneliness as a major “disease”. A “longing to belong” somewhere, makes many people more open to all kinds of groups where people try to build a relationship with them. How about the fellowship in the churches? Do we have fellowships and groups open to new people? Are we willing to become their new family?

4. ***The increasing shift in the balance of world Christianity.*** Worshipping Christians in Africa, Latin America and parts of Asia now grossly outnumber those in the former Christian countries. While the old churches of Europe primarily are occupied with preservation and maintenance of their traditions and structures, the world mission initiative has been taken over by the younger sister churches.
5. ***The decline in the number of worshipping Christians in the old established churches of Europe.*** Realistic statistics are now available from most churches, and all church leaders will soon have to face the grim truth of the huge and accelerating decline.
6. ***The lack of adequate leadership in the established churches who can meet the present need for change.*** While ability to implement change today is a top priority for leaders in all kinds of organisations; business corporations, public administration, health service, relief agencies etc., to meet “the rapid changes and present needs of the market”, very few bishops and church leaders seem to have such competence. We are not talking about a change in the doctrinal foundation of the church, or its basic message of salvation, but about changing the forms and traditions which determine how that message is presented.

Because culture is in a new paradigm, the old wineskins are collapsing. It is not the faith that needs to be changed but the paradigm or the wineskin in which Christianity is communicated, Robert E. Webber, The Younger Evangelicals. Facing the Challenges of the New World, Grand Rapids 2002, 15.

The radical change in the cultural situation calls for a major change in types of leadership. This seems to be part of the background for the strong growth of new networks of churches, and the emphasis on the need for a new apostolic ministry today, i.e.; *a ministry that leads the church into mission and on in mission.*

7. ***The quality of the training of pastors and church workers?*** Many academic faculties are today reworking their study programmes to open up for a greater variety of specialisation and practical orientations, but are they radical enough? A need today not only for traditional pastors, but for church planters, for church re-vitalisers (re-energisers), and even church undertakers? And what about the whole understanding of theology in the university faculties that also train pastors today? Cf the critical reflections by the Oxford theologian **McGrath** (2002:120-155).

B. Hindrances to change and growth in local churches today

A certain change in emphasis is notable in recent literature on *church development*. The basic question is not: what creates (promotes) growth, but: *what hinders growth*. We do believe that there is a growth dynamic and a growth potential present in every worshipping Christian congregation where Christ is proclaimed as Lord and Saviour and the Holy Spirit is invoked in prayer and sacramental action.

When so many local churches today are declining rather than growing, there must be some reasons for this. Where do we find the main hindrances to growth and new life?

Basic assumption: a Christian church needs a biblical vision for its life and ministry if it is supposed to grow.

(Matt 22,37-40 + Matt 28,19-20).

In obedience to the commandment of the Lord Jesus Christ, and with care and love for all mankind, it is the task of the church at all times to make disciples of Jesus Christ. This is done

through proclamation of the gospel in word and deed, and through baptism as incorporation into a church where they may grow in grace and knowledge of the Lord and his will, and be equipped to serve God and their fellow beings in the church and in the world.

Personally I also have a strong conviction that the important *notae ecclesiae* are to be found in a church that works to fulfil her sending, rather than in a church which is primarily concerned with the maintenance of itself as an institution. That is: if the church is going to remain apostolic, she has to give her sending to the world the highest priority.

Obstacles in three areas:

1. Isolation in relation to the local community. In many local churches there is a lack of real communication with the people, and with the needs, of the local community. In some churches there is a certain fear of being contaminated by the world, so all time is spent with other Christians. We need to learn to love and serve people, even if we do not approve of their lifestyle, 1 Cor 5,9-. Lots of interesting creativity in this area in churches around the world cf.: **Steve Sjøgren**, *Conspiracy of Kindness* (2000) and **Steve Sjøgren & Rob Lewin**, *Community of Kindness* (2003). www.servantevangelism.com

How do we create good rumours about the church in the local community?

2. Unattractive worship and fellowship in the church. If the members of the church lack enthusiasm and pride in their church, there is little reason for them to want to invite their friends and neighbours. On the other hand; if they are enthusiastic about the life of their church they may want others to be able to experience it. In many churches there is today an ongoing work to improve the quality of their ministry and fellowship. This has to begin with an honest evaluation aiming to identify the particular weak areas.

Perhaps the most interesting and useful programme for analysing the quality of life in a local church is **Christian A. Schwarz**, *Natural church development* (199?) and *Paradigm Shift in the Church. How Natural Development can Transform Theological Thinking* (ChurchSmart Resources, Carol Stream, IL 60188 [1999]).

From an analysis of 1000 churches in 32 countries on 6 continents Schwarz and his team has identified 8 quality features of healthy and growing churches around the world:

1. Equipping leadership
2. Ministry based on spiritual gifts
3. Committed life of faith
4. Functional structures
5. Inspiring worship services
6. Holistic cell groups
7. Need orientated evangelism
8. Warm relationships

The special strength of this approach is its flexibility and adaptability to different cultural and church situations, cf. www.CundP.de .

Cf.: **Carl-Erik Sahlberg**, *Längtan efter liv. Spår av en levande kyrka genom tvåtusen år* (1997) and *Gud i City* (1996). **Sahlberg** describes nine typical features of growing and thriving churches throughout the history of the church.

3. Obstacles represented by the structures, regulations and traditions of the denomination or network. This area may represent important reasons for the stagnation and decline in many of the established European churches. The denominational leadership and formal structures function in a limiting and restricting way, instead of releasing and inspiring. So where new life is bursting forth in a local church it is not allowed to express itself through new forms of worship and ministries. For this reason lots of young people seem to have left the established churches.

I norsk sammenheng har **Harald Hegstad**, i boken *Kirke i forandring* (1999) reist en rekke spørsmål vedrørende større muligheter for mangfold og variasjon innen den norske folkekirke, og også pekt på konkrete hindringer for mangfold. Han peker på slike hindringer både i det kirkeordningsmessige grunnlag, og i den tradisjonelle håndtering av dette. Konsekvensen av dette er følgende sier Hegstad:

Bare ved et sammentreff av ulike omstendigheter er det mulig for en lokalmenighet i Den norske kirke over tid å representere en vesentlig annerledes profil enn nabomenighetene (137).

Konkret peker han særlig på to hindringer for det å utvikle et større mangfold:

1. *Regelen om medlemskap ensidig knyttet til geografisk soknemenighet, og*
2. *Tilsettingsprosedyrer og praksis som hindrer menigheten i å utforme og profilere et lokalt menighetsliv over tid* (137-139).

Problems connected with the denominational network in three areas?

- a) The network hinders the local churches in developing a profile that is culturally and socially relevant to its community, especially in the area of worship.
- b) Formal regulations hinder the selection of a staff team with common visions and values, and cater for internal tensions and problems in the team. The local churches must have a much stronger say in the selection of its staff.
- c) The procedures for the appointment of pastors and other staff members emphasize formal training more than spiritual giftedness and human sensitivity and maturity. There is a need for clearer and better selection criteria on a national or diocesan level.

In an attempt to identify obstacles to growth and renewal in local churches these three areas should particularly be taken into consideration: *the relationship* between the local church and the community at large, *the internal quality* of the life and worship of the church, and *the role of the denominational network*.

How may the network be reworked into a resource for local churches that want to turn the tide?

C. From personal renewal to church renewal

For around forty years there has been an ongoing work for personal renewal by the Holy Spirit in the churches of the Nordic countries. To Lutherans it is best known through the Oasis

movements in Sweden, Denmark, Finland and Norway. Thousands of lay people have come to the large summer conferences and hundreds of pastors also to special leadership conferences. And huge numbers have met with God in a new and personal way, experiencing the release of spiritual gifts, a new joy and freedom in worship, and a new commitment to serve the Lord and his Church. And yet, very few of the local Lutheran parish churches have really come alive in a new way. On the contrary, hundreds, perhaps thousands, of those who have experienced personal renewal in this context are today active in other types of churches, some Lutheran – some not. And many others seem to be somewhat disillusioned. The reasons for this may be many and varied. But, speaking as one of those who have been active in this work for more than 30 years, I have to say that the result, so far, is very different from what we were praying for and hoping to see. We thank God for the many Lutheran free-churches and non-parochial churches that are growing today, but we would love to see this new life and growth also in traditional parish churches. Is this just a dream, or is it possible?

One of the reasons for this conference, and for several visits by Norwegian pastors and leaders to this and many other Anglican churches, is that we still believe it to be possible. We have seen here that even parish churches within the traditional structures of an old established denomination have been allowed to develop new forms of worship and ministries; and have thus been able to move out of the vicious circle of decline and into new growth.

In fact, the number of Anglicans listed as members on church electoral rolls within the diocese of London has grown from 45 thousand in 1990 to 64 thousand in 2000.

There seem to be, from a human point of view, two important preconditions for this new development:

- *A more flexible attitude in the leadership of the denominational network towards the inherited forms and traditions*
- *A stronger emphasise on the freedom and right of the local congregations, and its leaders, to develop their own profile of theology and churchmanship.*

After 30-40 years of work on renewal in the established Lutheran Churches of Scandinavia some lessons may be summed up:

- 1. Personal renewal in pastors and groups of lay people does not necessarily lead to renewal of their churches.**
- 2. Change of forms and traditions is not the same as renewal.**
- 3. Renewal is always a sovereign work of the Holy Spirit, the giver of life.**
- 4. When the Holy Spirit brings new life to a church this must be allowed to express itself in new and creative ways.**
- 5. If this is not granted the new life will either die or find other channels.**
- 6. A continuing work for spiritual renewal in established churches will be meaningful only if it includes a stronger focus on the structural obstacles for renewal, especially those represented by the denominational networks.**

D. From maintenance to mission

1. Change as a processes of shifting emphasise

One of the great needs of the churches at the threshold of a new century is leaders who can lead on in the process from maintenance to mission.

At present, few denominational leaders in the established Lutheran churches seem to be willing to face the drastic decline in our churches, and to realise what will be the consequences of this in 10-20 years.

This is also an area where we need to learn from the Anglican Church in England. In a number of books and reports the church here has been confronted with numbers and statistics demonstrating the grim and unhappy situation of the church.

One particularly challenging book is **Bob Jackson**, *Hope for the Church – contemporary strategies for growth*, Church House, London 2002. But this book not only offers a penetrating and challenging analysis, it also points to a lot of positive signs in many churches where the process of shifting the emphasis from maintenance to mission is well on its way.

This process has also been described in several writings by **Robert Warren**, cf.: *Launching a Missionary Congregation*, Warwick 1995 and *Being Human, Being Church*, London 1995. The following is an illustration from one his books, where typical features of the *church in its inherited mode* is compared with the now emerging churches in a *missionary mode*.

Aspect	Inherited mode	Emerging form
Structure	Fixed/heavy	Light/flxibel
Leadership	Clerical/control	Colloborative/creative
Focus	Church-life	whole-life
Form	Organization	Community
Pastoral goal	Happy	Holy
Expression	Single	Diverse
Orientation	Past	Future
Scale	1 2 3 4 5	6 7 8 9 10

2. Change – theologically motivated?

➤ *Ecclesia semper reformanda?*

One may wonder if this great principle of the Reformation has been forgotten in the established Lutheran churches. Or in its more complete form; *ecclesia reformata secundum verbi Dei semper reformanda*, “the church once reformed is always in the process of being reformed according to the Word of God”.

This principle seems to imply a great flexibility in the church, a flexibility that often is absent today. Cf. the very interesting discussion of this in **Darrell L. Guder**, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church*, Grand Rapids 2000. **Guder** claims that a church that is not willing to change from a preoccupation with the preservation of its own traditions and institutions, to an emphasis on missionary and evangelistic outreach, inevitably will represent a *reductionist gospel*. Nothing less than a radical conversion of the church is then called for.

The continual conversion of the church happens as the congregation hears, responds to, and obeys the gospel of Jesus Christ in ever new and more comprehensive ways (150).

So the church in every generation has to listen both to the Word of God and to its own contemporary culture. And if one of the basic aspects of the gospel is that *it is to be preached to all mankind*, then the church has to invest its main energy in finding ways of doing this in culturally relevant ways. The term *contextualisation* used to be central in the theology of foreign mission, but is today relevant also in the relationship of any church in her mission to the local community. Cf. this important issue in the theology of mission of Paul the apostle, 1 Cor 9,19-23

¹⁹ Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible.

20 To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law.

21 To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law.

22 To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some.

23 I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings.

➤ *The Identity of the Church – in its human traditions - or in the Gospel?*

In the debate about change and reforms in some Lutheran churches one may get the impression that resistance to change in the liturgy and traditions is grounded in a fear of losing the identity as a Lutheran church. And, of course, change and reform is not an aim in itself. But the understanding of the Church in the Lutheran Confession (Confessio Augustana, CA) is much more flexible, cf. art. 7:

For it is sufficient for the true unity of the Christian church that the Gospel be preached in conformity with a pure understanding of it and that the sacraments be administered in accordance with the divine Word.

It is not necessary for the true unity of the Christian church that ceremonies, instituted by men, should be observed uniformly in all places.

And likewise in art. 15:

Our churches teach that those rites should be observed which can be observed without sin and which contribute to peace and good order in the church.

One may ask whether a church, which is not in some form of *missionary mode*, still represents a pure understanding of the gospel, or whether a church, which observes *rites* that hinder outreach to and communication with the young generation, is not living in sin?

Even if the worship service was not at the centre of the attention of the reformer Martin Luther, he does voice some quite radical viewpoints in this area also.

Cf. *The German Mass, foreword* (1526):

For the orders must serve for the promotion of faith and love and not to the detriment of faith. As soon as they fail to do this, they are invalid, dead and gone; just as a good coin, when counterfeited, is cancelled and changed because of the abuse, or as new shoes when they become old and uncomfortable are no longer worn, but thrown away, and new ones bought. An order is an external thing. No matter how good it is, it can be abused. Then it is no longer an order, but a disorder. No order is, therefore, valid in itself – as the popish orders were held to be until now. But the validity, value, power, and virtue of any order is in its proper use. Otherwise it is utterly worthless and good for nothing.

It seems to be high time for the Lutheran churches today to regain something of the dynamic and fresh thinking of the original reformers.

Some of this fresh thinking is certainly present in the book, *Die neue Reformation. 96 Thesen zur Zukunft der Kirche*, Stuttgart 2001, by the young German lutheran pastor **Klaus Douglas**.

3. Change is not renewal – but renewal by the Holy Spirit prompts change

When you send your Spirit, they are created, and you renew the face of the earth, Psalm 104,30

There is an old ecumenical consensus about the Holy Spirit as giver of life in creation, in salvation and in the ongoing renewal to the church:

"Through the Holy Spirit comes our restoration to paradise, our ascension into the kingdom of heaven, our return to the adoption of sons, our liberty to call God our Father, our being made partakers of the grace of

Christ, our being called children of light, our sharing of eternal glory, and, in a word, our being brought into a state of all `fullness of blessing”, Basilios the great (+379), *On the Holy Spirit* 15,36, *Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers* 2 series, bd. 8, 22.

➤ *This seems to imply that renewal, both in the life of individuals and in the church, may happen where there is an earnest openness towards and invocation of the Holy Spirit*

” If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!” Luk 11,13

➤ *Invocation of the Spirit and strategic work for renewal must go together, hand in hand*

➤ *If the primary motivation for change is a stronger emphasis on evangelism and mission, this will be blessed by the Spirit,*
the Holy Spirit being the Spirit of witness and mission, Luke 24,47-49; John 15,26-27; Acts 1,8

E. Strategic challenges for the established churches in the coming decades

- 1. A need for renewal in leadership.** Development of a serving, equipping and transformational leadership, that may help the church to regain the apostolic meaning of being church, that is: *to be sent into the world with the gospel.*
- 2. More flexibility concerning forms of worship and ministry.** This is absolutely necessary if the church is to communicate with the growing variety in culture. More space for the manifestation of the Spirit in spiritual gifts, and for emotions and experience in worship.
- 3. A greater freedom for local churches** to develop, over time, their own profile of worship, theology and churchmanship.
- 4. Openness for a greater variety of ways of being church.** There is a need for new types of churches as a supplement to the traditional parish churches: youth congregations, network churches, cell churches etc.
- 5. Willingness to learn from other churches** and to implement programmes and strategies which have been proven valuable, cf. **Mike Booker and Mark Ireland, *Evangelism – which way now?*, London 2003.**
- 6. Willingness for open and honest evaluation** of the life and ministry of a church, and ways of keeping the staff workers responsible for the quality of their ministry and cooperation.
- 7. Critical evaluation of the national and diocesan bureaucracy.** A movement for control and restriction to inspiration and encouragement of those churches that are in a process of change. Transfer of resources from administrative functions to local churches.