

Being mission-shaped

The first in a series of opinion pieces on current issues for rural communities and their churches.

The Mission-shaped Church report quickly became a best-seller when it was published in 2004 and, we are told, led to an important step forward being taken in the church's understanding of God's mission. The subsequent Mission-shaped series seeks to consider how the principles presented in *Mission-shaped Church* can be applied in different areas of the church's life and mission.

One of the disappointments of the *Mission-shaped Church* agenda is the inability of those involved to have a coherent theology of mission. In fact, much of what purports to be *Mission-shaped Church* is clearly *Church-shaped Mission*. It is about how the church can be made more attractive and accessible to the missing generations, networks and cultures that abound. Rather than discerning where God is at work in redeeming and transforming creation – and joining in – it is about how to get more bums on seats; whether they be pitch-pine pews or chairs set out in caf style. Missing from the brave new understanding of mission is Christ's assertion that, "the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve." In order to restore some credibility the church needs to be far more altruistic in its mission; it needs to display an unselfish concern for the welfare of others rather than an obsession with its own survival and well-being.

Another weakness in the theology of mission espoused is that mission appears to be an added extra rather than something integral to the life and ministry of the church. To quote Sally Gaze in *Mission-*



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shaped and Rural: 'After the filling-in of faculty applications, the church fetes, the round of services repeated in each village, and the PCC meetings, there is all too little time left for mission – which tends to be the thing that we do after we've fulfilled all our other obligations.' No! 'All our other obligations' are surely the nuts and bolts of expressing and developing an effective Christian presence in the community – a presence which by its very nature is missionary. As Emil Brunner put it: 'The church exists by mission as fire exists by burning.' Mission is the church's *raison d'être*, however mundane and trivial that might seem at times and therefore it involves every aspect of our life together and of the church's engagement with the communities in which it is placed.

One also detects in *Mission-shaped* circles a rather negative appreciation of church buildings. Whilst it is true that buildings can inhibit mission, it is ironic, as John Inge has pointed out, that we are being encouraged to contemplate the

relinquishing of buildings just when the world is discovering the importance of place. There are numerous stories of the exciting and creative usage of church premises, many of which find their way into *Country Way*, from the hosting of post offices and farmers' markets to the recognition that 'in every tourist there is a pilgrim waiting to be recognized.' Whilst the church is the people and not the building and a Christian presence is not dependent on bricks and mortar, church premises are often found in prime locations and with a little imagination can easily become vital agents of mission.

A further sad omission from much that comes from the *Mission-shaped* stable is the ecumenical dimension. The rural workbook *Presence* was built on the premise that, 'an effective Christian presence in villages will always be ecumenical' but there is not even a hint of such an understanding in much of the *Mission-shaped* agenda. This betrays a more widespread reluctance to listen to others engaged in mission from different perspectives. In the rural context, the workbooks *Presence* and *Seeds in Holy Ground* indicate that there is already much that is exciting, creative, *mission-shaped* and fresh in the ways that rural churches are seeking to be church. If people were listening it would clearly be evident that the wheel does not always need re-inventing, however glossy the new finish might be. ■

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