

century were full of the same human frailties to be found today. Similarly today's vibrant churches of the two-thirds world are, from a Western perspective, 'powerless', and yet it is precisely there that we find a powerful model for mission.

Human frailties feature too in Morgan Derham's insightful contribution on 'Counselling in a Christian Context'. 'Holiness' as distinct from 'wholeness' is the aim of the Christian pastor-there's food for thought!

One final comment; let me remind readers that we are always happy to receive articles (between 500 and 3000 words) relating to the practice of ministry

## **THE MISSION FIELD ON OUR DOORSTEP**

**By Martin Robinson**

We are now approaching the closing years of our twentieth century. This simple chronological fact has stimulated a great deal of thinking about the progress of the church and its mission over the last 100 years. At just the same point of time, 100 years ago, our forebears were engaged in a similar process of reflection. As they looked back on their century (the 19th), they were able to see the effects of the first 100 years of the modern missionary movement around the world. They knew that the church had seen enormous growth, both numerical and in percentage terms. The percentage of the world's population claiming to be Christian had grown from 10% to 33 % in that single century. Naturally, they began to wonder what the 20th might bring.

Their reflections, hopes and dreams came to a climax at the Edinburgh Missionary Conference of 1910. There, mission-minded church leaders began to talk in terms of 'completing the task of mission' during the 20th century. The phrase 'winning the world to Christ in our generation' became the watchword for the Conference. The conference developed some strategies Europe is now for accomplishing this task. The nature of these strategies can

be understood by looking at where the delegates came from - 500 from the United States of America, 500 from the United Kingdom and a further 170 from other European countries (mainly Germany, Holland and Scandinavia). Just 26 delegates came from the rest of the world. Of these only 6 were actually indigenous Christians from the mission fields around the world, and not one was an African!

In other words, the evangelisation of the world was assumed to be a task for the Anglo-Saxon race. The world would be evangelised from the secure sending base of Europe and North America. It is very unlikely that any of the delegates at Edinburgh in 1910 would have guessed that within 50 years, the secure mission base would itself become a mission field. Yet as we reflect on the events of our own century we know that this is indeed what has happened. Europe, possibly for the first time in 1,000 years, is now a mission field. This reality has huge implications for our strategies for evangelism, church planting, and mission.

It is generally agreed that it was the French worker priest of the 1940s who first drew the attention of the church to the fact that a European country was actually pagan and must now be described as a mission field. Many others since that time have come to accept that this is an accurate description of most of Western Europe. However, despite the fact that there is now a widespread recognition amongst Christians that Europe is a mission field, there is very little evidence that the church in Europe has been able to grapple with this task in an effective manner. Two major problems seem to present themselves.

### **Structured for Mission**

First, we need to look internally at our evangelistic strategies. As the Dutch theologian Visser 't Hooft put it, the evangelistic strategy of the European church has often consisted of a call to people to return to Christ, or to the Christian faith, although most people have never begun and so cannot return. Most evangelism seems to address the fringe of the church, or in the case of more aggressive evangelists, the fringes of other churches. Not only is this form of evangelism very limited, it also speaks to fewer and fewer people, because the fringes of most churches in Europe have been shrinking significantly over the last fifty years.

There are those churches which seek to expand the fringes. However, even in these cases, the framework which is chosen often carries a pastoral motif. In other words, a great deal of work is invested in demonstrating to people that the church cares about them. At one level this is very worthy and certainly no-one would wish the church to demonstrate that it doesn't care about those outside its immediate circle, even if we suspect that in some cases this may actually be true. The real problem lies in the fact that many of those who stand outside our pastoral structures do not really have much interest in whether we care for them or not. If such people are to be reached it must be by other means entirely.

How has such a situation come about? To some extent; the church in Europe has been a victim of its own past success. Throughout the medieval period, there was no realistic alternative for most people but to be a Christian. To be an atheist would be to leave society as much as to leave the church. Even for much of the modern era, we have spoken of our country and our continent as 'Christian' in its values, its culture and its major beliefs. What is the task of any church in such a situation? Surely it is to help people be better Christians (which involves the exercise of the teaching ministry), and to care for those who are needy Christians (the exercise of the pastoral ministry). These two ministries, pastoral and teaching, have become so strongly identified with ministry that any other ministry tends to be interpreted through that lens. Therefore, it is not surprising that evangelism is seen as an extension of pastoral care to those who at the moment do not attend church.

What then of mission? Even today, mission is often seen as an overseas activity. Even on those occasions when churches adopt such slogans as 'mission on the six continents' or 'mission to everywhere from everywhere', there is a great deal of uncertainty as to what mission actually means on the mission field of Europe. In order to arrive at an understanding it will be essential to move from structures dominated by the pastoral and the teaching to a more balanced whole. Apostles (founders of new initiatives), prophets (those who can hear the word of God for a situation), and evangelists (those who can clearly present the gospel), need to stand alongside (not instead of), pastors and teachers. In short we need to restructure the leadership of our European churches for mission.

## **The Filter of Failure**

Even if we do restructure for mission, there is a second major problem, to do with the mission field itself. When we hear stories of vast numbers coming to Christ in South America, Africa, parts of Asia, and more recently Eastern Europe, we in the West can easily be overawed. We know that it is not like that in Western Europe. Even churches with highly committed memberships, good communicators and gifted musicians are not likely to receive such a response in the communities in which they work and witness.

The issues of secularisation within Europe have been widely discussed, especially in the writings of Lesslie Newbigin and others in the 'Gospel and Our Culture' movement. Such writers have clearly shown how in the popular mind the true claims of Christianity are thought to have been disproved by science. The world view offered by the enlightenment provides 'paradigm structures' that communicate that Christianity is simply not credible as an explanation of reality. Such a process has led to a situation in which, although Christian values are thought worthwhile in themselves, the upholding of those values by being part of the community of faith is considered unnecessary. Amongst older people, the phrase 'you don't have to go to church to be a Christian' has widespread currency, whilst amongst younger people, many of whom are open to the idea of spiritual encounter, the church is not seen as offering a valid contemporary spirituality.

The fact is this: although Europe is a mission field, in some ways very open in terms of a new search for spirituality, we are not, as in other fields, operating in virgin territory. People's impressions of Christianity and the church act as important filtering agents. Our message is often not heard fairly or accurately, precisely because it is viewed through the filters of the past. Such filters send out two important messages.

First, they suggest that Christianity has already been tried and found wanting. In a strange kind of way our very attempts to evangelise people through our pastoral framework actually confirm this impression. The caring strategy of the pastoral ministry diffuses our message instead of giving it clarity. The attempt to care for people who do not necessarily understand the real basis of that caring message can all too easily be seen as patronising and not pastoral. It is almost as if those who are not

Christians see our attempts to offer care as an oblique admission that we offer care only because we do not have a credible message.

The second, and even more devastating message comes with the arrival of 'New Age' spirituality: that Christianity is not only irrelevant but has now been superseded. Christianity was fine for people in the past but now something better has come. To quote Visser 't Hooft again, "There is very little evidence to show that men who have gone through the secularisation stage come back to the church or to any form of classical Christianity." The notion that Christianity has now been replaced by something better is also the explicit message of those who are active as missionaries for Islam in Europe.

### **Building a Missionary Church**

With apologies to a certain well-known politician, it is time for the church to move 'back to basics'. By this I do not mean neo-fundamentalism. Less still do I mean concern for techniques and methods. Our very understandable concern for ready answers is itself partly a reflection of the culture in which we live. The task that faces us is more significant than simple acquisition of the right technology.

As we consider what it means to be a missionary in the West, we have two important resources on which to draw. First, we have the record of the church in New Testament times. I am not suggesting that we can replicate the New Testament church with no regard to the years of history that lie between us and the early church. Nevertheless, the religious plurality of the culture in which the early church operated is certainly closer to our own age than is our recent experience. The story of how a small, homogeneous group of believers spread their message throughout a hostile world is at the very least one which can fire our spiritual imagination. The church described in the New Testament had few natural advantages. It was not powerful in the sense that it was influential or wealthy. The letters of Paul demonstrate that the early church often fell far short of the moral and doctrinal purity that we sometimes imagine. It was full of the same human frailties that are evident in our own churches.

Second, we have the unparalleled example of growing churches around the world to inspire and teach us. In our own generation the world-wide church has undergone a remarkable

transformation. At the beginning of this century the church was unquestionably anchored in the West. The typical Christian was European or American. The church was scarcely present in many parts of the world. Over the last twenty years, the centre of world Christianity has decisively moved. Perhaps for the first time ever, Christianity is genuinely a world faith. The typical Christian is now an African. The church consists overwhelmingly of those living in the southern hemisphere. It is a church of the poor who reach out to the rich. It is a church of the two thirds world which speaks to the one third world in the West. It is perhaps above all a vibrant yet powerless church which will help us to learn how to become missionaries in our own culture.

After 13 years in local ministry, **Rev Dr Martin Robinson** went to work for the Bible Society in a variety of roles, including Director of Mission and Theology. He subsequently became Chief Executive of Together in Mission and more recently Principal of Springdale College. In 2015, Martin led the process of formally merging the two organisations to become ForMission. He has written many books on the theme of mission, and is co-founder and co-editor of the *Journal of Missional Practice*.

## **PAUL'S MINISTRY ... AND OURS**

**By Ralph P Martin**

We all have our ideas and models of what Christian ministry should be. Let me suggest that we can do no better than turn to Paul as the apostolic paradigm and see in his understanding a set of paradoxical pictures to assist us.

In 2 Corinthians 4:7 the apostle Paul writes of his service as a Christian leader: “But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us”. (NRSV)