

Christ's Little Flock: Towards an Ecclesiology of the Cross

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According to René Padilla, Director of the Kairos Institute, Argentina, and Tearfund's International President, 'one of the greatest challenges we Christians have at the threshold of the third millennium is the articulation and practical implementation of an ecclesiology that views the local church, and particularly the church of the poor, as the primary agent of holistic mission'.¹

This article attempts to explore some of the dimensions of this challenge. It begins to outline certain questions and, while it does not provide full answers, it does make some affirmations and suggestions. The affirmations are certain realities about the local church that in the maelstrom of cultural change I believe it is important to affirm and indeed the importance of them is highlighted by the nature of that change. The suggestions are a tentative attempt to offer some ways of re-imagining the church.

1. The questions of modernity

To the extent that modernity summarises an ideology or worldview built on human rationality and progress, the questions it poses have long been wrestled with in the apologetics of the church. I want to consider some of the questions posed by modernity as a social phenomenon, particularly globalisation and one of its key features, urbanization.

• 1.1 Geography and community

Traditionally a given congregation was defined by two things that its members held in common: the gospel and their locality. This was embodied most obviously in the parish system, but it holds true for non-conformist churches too. The expression 'local church' reflects the centrality of geography in defining the concrete manifestations of the church.

Prima facie this reflects the language of the New Testament. In the New Testament churches are qualified either with reference to God or to location. The New Testament speaks of the church of God or Christ and the church of Corinth *et al.* Paul deliberately avoids the association of churches with individuals or factions (1 Corinthians 1:10-17).

For better or worse, denominationalism adds further defining characteristics to the gospel and locality, but it does not fundamentally alter the place of geography in

defining congregations. People may opt to go to one local church rather than another for denominational, theological, ethnic or cultural reasons, but they still opt to go to a *local* church.

But modernity begins to raise questions about the role of geography in defining congregations, especially in an urban context. The propensity for people to move house means that their key relationships are less likely to be related to the neighbourhood within which they dwell. The proximity of most of the city to most people within it and the availability of transport makes this possible. In the city, neighbourhood has declined as the main expression of community. Many urban people live in dormitory suburbs in which they only sleep: work, leisure, shopping – and sometimes even eating – are done elsewhere. There is little sense of neighbourhood and neighbours.

The communities to which a person belongs are volitional rather than geographic. It would be tempting, given the dominance of the language of the new information and communication technologies in public discourse (a temptation to which I will succumb later), to call these virtual communities, but I prefer the term volitional communities. These are communities into which people opt rather than communities in which people find themselves. They may be many and various. A person will be part of a series of overlapping communities. They may have a network of work colleagues, a group of people with whom they play sport, friends with whom they socialise, family networks and so on.

In neighbourhood communities the members of the community were all members of one community. Like it or not, you shared a common set of relationships. Now urban dwellers belong to a variety of communities, many of which will overlap, but the overlap may only rarely be substantial. My community of work colleagues may overlap with some of my social communities, but the extent of that overlap will vary considerably. In a city like London it is common for someone to live 100 miles from the work colleague sitting at the next desk.

This raises important issues, both for community development and for ecclesiology. Most of the main community development models were developed in rural contexts where a community is well-defined and relatively stable. In an urban context people belong to different communities which are constantly reconfiguring. In an urban context community development begs the question, 'Which community?' and even 'What

community?’ Development practice appears to undergo a subtle shift when it moves from rural to urban contexts. In rural contexts the talk is of community development, that is, the development of a given pre-existing community. In an urban context this becomes the development of community, that is, forging community bonds where few exist; the development of what is known as ‘social capital’.

The same questions surround the issue of church in an urban context. If community and geography are diverging, which road should the church follow? Is geography part of the essence of church? Or is the key thing community rather than geography? Should churches be defined in terms of their association with human communities rather than geographic neighbourhoods?

These questions arise as never before with the division of community and geography in modernity. While communities were defined in terms of geography, it made sense to define the church in terms of geography. But if the definitions of community are changing, why not also those of church? Should we be creating communities which are co-terminus with natural relational networks or should we be creating alternative, or additional, relational networks?

If we define community in volitional terms, then why not church? If the community of people with whom I work is more significant to me than the community among whom I live, why not have a church of my work place? If community is defined by common interest rather than common location then why not interest-group churches? And where do the limits lie? If I can be part of a virtual community on the Internet then why not a part of a virtual Internet church?

Some people have suggested what they call ‘zonal’ structures – an approach that affirms *both* geographic and volitional communities. They propose, to borrow a phrase for organizational theory, ‘matrix churches’ in which neighbourhood expressions of church co-exist with other expressions of Christian community. I might belong to a workplace ‘church’ *and* a local church.

This question casts an old missiological debate in a new way. Defining churches by interest group raises the thorny issue of homogeneity. Missiologists such as Donald McGavran and Peter Wagner have argued on the basis of empirical evidence that homogeneous churches grow fastest. Homogeneous churches are those in which all the members are from a similar social, ethnic or cultural background. People prefer to associate with people like themselves. They called this the *homogeneous unit principle* and it is has been promoted as a principle of church growth.

The homogeneous unit principle has, however, been attacked, especially by evangelicals from the Third World. One criticism is that it defines people in ethnic terms when there may be other more significant common factors that need to be recognized, especially that of poverty. If, for missiological reasons, people are defined in terms of their people group, we may under-

state the importance of poverty in determining their lives.

But the main criticism of the homogeneous unit principle is that it denies the reconciling nature of the gospel and the church. The gospel is good news not only of reconciliation with God, but also with other people. People of different ethnic backgrounds and social classes are united through the gospel. To grow homogeneous churches is to evacuate the gospel of a key part of its meaning. It is to weaken the demands of Christian discipleship. And it leaves the church vulnerable to partiality in ethnic conflict. If the church becomes associated with one social group it will also be associated with the political aspirations of that social group. The church must witness to the reconciling work of the cross.

1.2 Reaching the marginalized

It is not just the split in modernity between geography and community *per se* that raises these issues. The issues are also raised by a desire to reach marginalized communities in the conditions created by modernity. These are not simply theoretical issues; they are missiological issues.

In practice every church is homogeneous to some extent. At a basic level most churches opt to function in one language – or, in rare cases, two. This immediately creates a considerable degree of homogeneity. Rightly or wrongly, local churches are already to some degree volitional. People choose churches on the basis of worship-style, denominational allegiance, theological emphasis and even cultural background. This is especially so in an urban context where more choice exists. Already in cities and large towns geography plays little part in defining some congregations as people travel from across the city to large city-centre churches.

The result of this in the UK has been to leave significant sectors of the population untouched by the gospel. British evangelicalism is largely middle-class. Our evangelism revolves around our friendships, thus excluding those outside our circle of acquaintance. More significantly still, our church life and evangelism reflect a middle-class culture. Homogeneous groups do seem to be effective in evangelism, but they are by definition exclusive rather than inclusive.

Should we then establish groups or plant churches that target those otherwise marginalized by our churches? Should we, for example, be thinking in terms of a church for drug users or a youth church that reflects teen culture? Or does this perpetuate the failure to take seriously the reconciling nature of the cross that was the problem in the first place? Should we work harder at reconciliation and establish churches that reflect heterogeneous cultures and sub-cultures?

Consider the following examples:

1. Many early black immigrants went to local (white) churches when they first arrived in Britain. They

were often greeted with hostility and told they should attend 'your' church, in others words a local black congregation. This was perplexing for many, to say the least, since they had been converted and nurtured in churches of the same denomination as those churches that were now rejecting them. Instinctively they thought of these denominations as 'their' churches. Most of the early black congregations in the UK arose because immigrants were not welcomed in white churches.

2. A Tearfund partner in Bristol is working with prostitutes and drug addicts. As a result of their work a number have been converted and others are open to the gospel. Integrating them into the largely middle-class sponsoring church would involve too great a cultural leap. Instead they have started meeting to look at the Bible and pray together and more recently the partner has recognized that this group is a church.

My hunch is that many readers will react differently at an *emotional* level to these examples. Yet what is the *theological* difference? Both involve the creation of homogeneous churches because of the cultural gap between a group of people and existing churches. Can we develop, to borrow a phrase from geometry, a tautologically equivalent rationale that includes one and not the other? We could multiply examples from around the world. In some parts of the world caste and tribalism make these issues acute. But wherever Christians are working with the poor and marginalized integration into existing churches is an issue.

The following examples, all of which are real, illustrate the diverse ways in which these questions are raised. What biblical principles allow us to determine which are legitimate and which is not?

1. A large city church has started a student congregation.
2. An African congregation uses the premises of a Baptist church on Sunday afternoons.
3. A church in Wales that has two congregations which meet in the same premises at the same time – one using English, the other using Welsh.
4. A church leader has started a congregation that meets in the school hall at 3.30 pm on Monday afternoons in order to reach mothers and their children.
5. A church leader plans to establish groups along homogeneous lines (young couples, families, retired people and so on) that will all meet together on Sundays.
6. People can log onto a cyber-church to receive teaching and pastoral advice, leave prayer requests and share in discussion forums.

Some people have argued that homogeneity is a principle of mission while reconciliation is a principle of church, but does this make too strong a distinction between mission and church, a distinction which struggles to do justice to the essential missionary nature of

the church?

Reflection on the sociological background of the apostolic church may suggest another approach to the issue. The churches of the New Testament were probably networks of household churches. Could it be that these were heterogeneous networks of homogeneous household congregations? It is a neat solution, but does it build too much on too little? Is it an ecclesiology built on too much sociology and not enough theology?

Or do we need homogeneity *for the sake of diversity*? Will we include only certain sections of the population through congregations that are homogenous? One Tearfund partner in the UK said: 'When middle-class people come in they destroy the confidence of my people just by the state of their hair.' Could it be that only by planting a church that defines itself in terms of the culture of a socially marginalized group, can we hope to prevent that church being dominated by the dominant social culture?

My concern is not to resolve the question of ecclesiastical homogeneity in this article. It is simply to highlight the way two inter-related realities accentuate the question. One is the split in modernity between geography and community. The other is the concern to reach socially marginalized groups who are alienated from existing churches and their cultures. These issues come together in urban mission, casting the question of the homogeneous unit principle, which began life in rural contexts, in a new way.

1.3 The marks of the church

It is a question that calls for a fresh examination of the marks of the church.

The Reformers said the marks of the church are the word (gospel) and the two sacraments of baptism and communion. These distinguished a true church of Christ from an apostate church. The radical wing of the Reformation, the Anabaptists, identified discipline as a third mark of the church.

I do not want to diminish the importance of these three factors in defining the church. But I do want to recognize that they were shaped by their context. Theological definitions are often either reductionist or functional. A reductionist definition over-simplifies its object. A functional definition does not claim to provide a complete definition, but a sufficient one to fulfil a particular function.

The Reformation marks of the church were functional: they enabled the Reformed churches to justify themselves in contra-distinction from the Roman Catholic Church. They enabled the Reformers to make sense of the break with Rome. While the Roman Catholic Church argued that the visible church descended from Peter was the true church, the focus on word and sacraments enabled Reformers to define the church in terms of the gospel rather than visible institutions or structures. The Anabaptist addition of disci-

pline reflected their vision of the church as a gathered community of believers rather than a state church encompassing all people.

The Reformation marks of the church remain important today. Nevertheless, while gospel and sacrament may be necessary marks of a church, are they sufficient? The Reformers ignored the issue of community and geography because they assumed a parish system. Early Protestantism was defined by geography: where the state was Protestant, the church was Protestant. Most of the early Reformation writings were not addressed to individuals, but to civil leaders. And the Reformation marks of the church may not be sufficient in other ways. The Reformers, for example, included neither love nor mission as essential marks of the church.

The inadequacy of the traditional marks and definitions of the church is exposed when you try to use them to decide whether the following could be considered a church:

- a university or workplace Christian union
- a regular prayer triplet
- a diocese or denominational association
- a Christian mission agency
- an evangelistic follow-up group
- a church planting team
- a Christian conference

Earlier we spoke about the possibility of a workplace 'church' or even a matrix of church associations embracing both local (geographic) church and workplace church. But can we call a workplace Christian union a 'church'? It is not enough to say that a Christian Union does not fulfil the Reformation marks of a church because it does not administer the sacraments. Why not? I suspect that most of those involved in such groups would say that they do not administer the sacraments because they are not a church. The argument is circular.

In summary, by breaking the link between community and geography, modernity raises new ecclesial questions. Urban mission, especially to social marginalized groups, accentuates these questions. We need to rethink the 'ecclesiality' of the church, the place of homogeneity and the marks of the church.

2. The questions of postmodernity

It is not just the social realities of modernity that pose new ecclesial questions. New questions are also posed by the worldview of postmodernity – and more particularly its culture and values. Postmodernism, like any human culture, has some elements within it that are affirmed by the gospel and others that are challenged by the gospel. I have no desire to defend the relativism of postmodern epistemology with, at a popular level, its advocacy of a tyrannical tolerance. These cultural shifts have been well charted and critiqued. I do not want to repeat them here. Instead I want to highlight the way in

which these changes are reflected in a suspicion of hierarchical structures and even organized networks.

Postmodernism has highlighted the interplay between power and truth. Power, not reality, determines social truths. Truth, it is argued, simply reflects social hegemony or even functions as a tool of social repression. Whether it has shaped them or been shaped by them, postmodernism reflects important social changes. The institutions of science, business and politics have lost their authority. We used to think science would solve all our problems – now we worry about the problems it creates. Genetic modification may offer huge benefits to humanity, but the public regard them with great suspicion. A generation that has grown up exposed to hundreds of adverts each day has become cynical of corporate claims. The downsizing of the eighties destroyed the last vestiges of corporate loyalty. The postmodern generation no longer assumes those in authority are right. An attitude of respect has been replaced by one of suspicion, even cynicism.

This has significant implications both for the church as an institution and the way it organizes mission. These questions range from the way power is handled in local congregations to the place of denominational and meta-church structures.

An often discussed indication of this is the dramatic decline in denominational allegiance among people today. But it has other implications. Ecumenism has largely been pursued through ecclesiastical co-operation and international organizations such as the World Council of Churches. The ultimate ecumenical goal has been the denominational merger. This, it is assumed, represents the greatest possible fulfilment of Jesus' prayer in John 17. But to postmodernity all such activity is irrelevant. It puts little store by denominational structures and pan-denominational organizations. The cultural context is changing fast, raising big questions about what were once our greatest achievements.

Although some evangelicals have flirted with the notion of an evangelical meta-denomination, most have avoided what they regarded as the blind alley of denominational unity, preferring to find other ways of expressing Christian unity. But it may be that these, too, reflect a modernist outlook.

Let me illustrate with a personal story. I attended the International Consultation on Missiology held under the auspice of the Missions Commission of the World Evangelical Fellowship in Iguassu, Brazil, in October 1999. The goal of the conference was to produce the 'Iguassu Statement' and a number of those involved worked hard to produce an agreed document. But I could not generate much energy for this undertaking. Some of the older participants looked to the younger participants to be the voices of dissent; to add a radical edge to the statement. But I felt disinterest, even cynicism.

It was not that I did not want to discuss mission with Christians from around the world – I relished the opportunity to meet theologians, practitioners and mission

executives from different cultures. But to me the notion that the consultation, even one with such distinguished participants, could hand down missiological affirmations, let alone mission strategy, from on high was ludicrous. There were issues discussed in the conference about which I feel strongly, but I could not get steamed up about a statement that I felt was irrelevant to the true locus of mission – a locus described in the opening quote of this essay as ‘the church of the poor’.

Christians shaped by postmodernism, sometimes classified as Generation Xers can be passionate about mission, but they are apathetic, even suspicious of, missionary bureaucracy, institutions and hierarchies. They view these things as hindrances to mission rather than enablers of it. It may be that neither side is right, but that these differences reflect theologically neutral cultural shifts. But it may be that postmodernism, or rather postmodern culture, for all its faults, offers important correctives to a missiological approach too much shaped by modernity.

Modernity loves to organize and stratify whether it is developing families of species in the sciences or the vast corporate structures of the multinationals in business. Postmodernity is different. Postmodernity, at least at a popular level, suspects concentrations of power.

It is not just meta-institutions that postmoderns suspect. The same centralizing tendencies are evident in some of the meta-narratives used in ecclesiastical and missiological circles. Once again, if I may speak personally, I have a dis-ease with calls to win the nation for Christ or talk of a Christian society or claims that we can complete the task of world evangelisation within our generation. It suggests the possibility of closure before the parousia. It suggests that closure is in our hands rather than in the hands of the sovereign God. I do not believe in a Christian Britain anymore than I believe in a sinless Christian. It is over-realized eschatology.

Writing as a Generation Xer on Generation X and mission, Richard Tiplady says:

I suspect you will see a lack of enthusiasm for ambitious programmes to complete the evangelisation of the world. We’ve heard it all before and we expect that we’ll hear it again. What we’re looking for is low-key, sustainable, grass-roots mission involvement. Don’t try to bamboozle us with talk of ‘the big picture’. It will be wrong. The world is too complex, life is too changeable, and God is too mysterious, for us to get fired up by that kind of language.²

Even organized networks reflect a modernist outlook. Networks are the motherhood and apple pie of evangelical co-operation – no-one will gainsay them. But even networks may come to be viewed as centralizing structures; they may be viewed as even more potent theatres for power plays. The thrill of claiming how many people or organizations you represent can be very seductive. Networks are quick to make exclu-

sive claims. ‘We are *the* network for . . .’ But Generation X may be neither impressed by, nor even interested in, such statements.

It is not that postmoderns are uninterested in unity, co-operation or making links. But they look to express these in relational rather than structural ways. The instinct of modernity is to fulfil the need for co-operation and unity through a structure, an organization or a network. The instinct of postmodernity, rightly or wrongly, is to see structure as deadening. They want to operate at a far more relational level. And that means a far greater degree of serendipity. The expressions that unity and co-operation may take are much less predictable. And postmoderns see that as a virtue. It is not just that the structures of modernity may need to change. They may become irrelevant.

New expressions of church are already emerging without denominational allegiance. The role of mission agencies may change as more individuals and churches opt to express their commitment to mission through relational connections that have arisen in an *ad hoc* way. People may opt for *ad hoc* expressions of unity and co-operation rather than expressing that through overarching or centralising networks.

I do not want to predict the future. I do not know the extent to which these things may happen, if at all, nor the timescale involved. My concern is to reflect theologically upon them. Postmodernism both questions our current models of ecclesiastical and missiological organization and offers alternatives.

In discussing the questions raised by postmodernity I have spoken personally. This is because I am aware that my outlook to these issues mirrors that of postmodernity. I do not believe in a metanarrative of church supremacy (though I do believe in the metanarrative of divine sovereignty). Is this something that postmodernity can teach us or is this a sign of my enculturation? Is this essay polemic or is it confession? I think it is polemic, but can I trust myself? I am not sure I know. So my final comment is a characteristically postmodern corruption of Mark 13:14: ‘Let the reader decide.’

2. Christ’s Little Flock: towards an ecclesia crucis

The forces created by globalisation are a new reality with which the church must contend. In an integrated, liberalised global economy decisions about a factory in Mexico City may be made in Geneva. Market shifts in London can affect rural economies in India. The speed of the new information and communication technologies amplify this process of global cause and affect while at the same time accelerating its pervasiveness. With this economic globalisation comes a cultural globalisation, especially so in the fast-growing urban centres of our world. We are heading for a situation in which urban dwellers the world over will have more in common with each other than they do with rural dwellers in

their own countries. At the same time, in reaction to the homogenising pressure of globalisation, renewed interest in cultural identity is emerging together with new nationalisms.

It is tempting in the face of globalisation to suppose that the church requires corresponding global structures. It is tempting to suppose that the priority of the hour is to strengthen global institutions and create global networks. With globalisation concentrating power in transnational corporations and international institutions surely we need powerful transnational Christian agencies. We need access to the national and global media. We need influence in the halls of power. We need national evangelistic campaigns, mega-churches and a powerful political voice. We want to think big.

This is not a new temptation. Globalisation casts it in a new light, but the church has always faced the temptation to seek power and influence in the world. Jesus himself was offered authority over all the kingdoms of the world. This was the seduction of Christendom.

I want to suggest that in response to globalisation we need a renewed confidence in 'Christ's little flock' or what Padilla calls 'the church of the poor'. It is now a common place to talk about the local church as the agent of mission. But in practice the mission agency (sic.) and the missionary are still viewed as the primary agents of mission. The situation is just as acute in Christian community development where the project is the basic unit of development. But the centrality of the church in the purposes of God suggests not only that church is a vital context for mission and development, but that *the church is the basic unit of mission and development*. Tearfund's Operating Principles say:

The New Testament gives little explicit teaching on either evangelistic or developmental methods. Instead it calls upon the church to be a caring, inclusive and distinctive community of reconciliation reaching out in love to the world. When we see the church in this way there is no opposition between evangelism and social action.³

Rather than thinking big, we need to think small. The temptation is to think that what we need most are national evangelistic campaigns; or mega-churches with slick multi-media presentations; or media attention and political influence. But Jesus says the kingdom of God has been given to his 'little flock' (Luke 12:32). At the heart of Jesus' future are not globalised ecclesial or missiological structures, but small unassuming churches – Christ's little flock. And to Christ's little flock the kingdom of God has been given – the all-powerful, life-giving, rule of God.

Luther distinguished between a *theologia gloriae* and a *theologia crucis*. The *theologia gloriae* seeks the revelation of God in the power and glory of his actions. The *theologia crucis* sees the ultimate revelation of God in the cross, seeing there by faith, power in weakness, wisdom in folly and glory in shame. This was

the foundational principle of Reformation theological method.

We need to develop a corresponding understanding of the *ecclesia crucis*, of which the phrase 'Christ's little flock' is an image. I have borrowed the term *ecclesia crucis* from Emil Brunner who says in *The Mediator*:

The whole history of Christianity, and the history of the world as a whole, would have followed a different course if it has not been that again and again a *theologia crucis* became the *theologia gloriae*, and that the *ecclesia crucis* became an *ecclesia gloriae*.⁴

The church is always tempted towards an *ecclesia gloriae* whether that takes the form of grand buildings, political influence, global structures, charismatic personalities or mega-churches. But the ecclesiology consistent with the gospel of Christ crucified and discipleship shaped by that gospel is an *ecclesiology of the cross*. That means power in weakness, wisdom in folly and glory in shame. It means we must put our confidence in Christ's little flock and the sovereign rule of God. It means we must put our energies into the *ecclesia crucis* even if that means obscurity.

4. *The universal church: re-imagining interchurch relationships*

The onward march of globalisation must surely precipitate among us a new interest in the global nature of the church. But at the same time the *ecclesia crucis* and the questions raised by postmodernity must make us wary of globalising ecclesiastical structures. Globalisation itself is the spread of culture and values combined with greatly increased connexity rather than the product of a global structure or scheme. Even transnational corporations, the apotheosis of globalisation, are increasingly adopting federated structures. In this globalised world how can the church express its universal nature without compromising the servant nature of the *ecclesia crucis*?

The universal church has been called the 'unassembled assembly'. The phrase highlights the difficulty with the notion of the universal church. You cannot have an 'unassembled assembly' – it is an oxymoron. In this sense the notion of the universal church is an abstraction that borders on the meaningless. How can we articulate an understanding of the universal church?

The place to start is at the end. The 'unassembled assembly' will one day assemble before the throne of the Lamb. The universal church is not so much the 'unassembled assembly' as the 'not yet assembled assembly'. The universal church is an eschatological reality.

The universal church is an eschatology reality because the universal church not only unites Christians around the world, it also unites them throughout the ages. And so it must be an eschatological reality

because only at the eschaton will all the elect have been gathered in; only at the eschaton will we be united with those who have gone before and those who, unless Christ comes in our day, will come after. And it is an eschatological reality because at the heart of God's great plan is the creation of a new humanity in a new creation when the perfect bride, the church, will be united with Christ.

Our first word about the universal church must therefore be an eschatological word. It is the 'not yet assembled assembly'. Yet even in the 'now' Christians on earth are united with the heavenly assembly. The New Testament speaks of the heavenly assembly as a present reality (Ephesians 2:6-7; Hebrews 12:22-24). The 'not yet assembled assembly' of the eschatological universal church is anticipated not in any earthly institutions, but in the heavenly assembly around the throne.

Both the concept of the 'not yet assembled assembly' and its anticipation in the heavenly congregation have significant relativizing power. When Judaizers came to Galatia demanding, among other things, submission to the authority of the Jerusalem church, Paul counters by referring to 'the Jerusalem that is above'. 'Mother church' is not the historical Jerusalem church, but the heavenly assembly of the new Jerusalem. (Galatians 4:26). Our 'headquarters' are in heaven. The body that sustains each local church and to which it owes allegiance is the heavenly congregation with Christ as its head meeting in permanent session.

The future congregation relativises present institutions while the heavenly congregation relativizes earthly institutions. The eschatological nature of the universal church subverts all those claims to exclusivity and hegemony of which postmodernity is suspicious. In this respect at least, postmodern suspicions have a theological foundation. We need to replace a metanarrative of church supremacy on earth with a metanarrative of Christ's supremacy in heaven to which the book of Revelation testifies – a supremacy which will one day extend to all the earth.

But can we also speak of the 'now' of the universal church on earth? Can we find a way of talking about the reality of 'church' outside the local congregation that makes sense of our experience and which is consistent with the eschatological fulfilment? And, to ask a more postmodern question, can we shape our extra-congregational relations in a way that does not concentrate power or attempt to bring forward the eschatological reality prematurely?

Protestant theology has often spoken of the universal church as an invisible reality. This was intended as a recognition that the membership of the visible church was not co-terminus with membership of the kingdom of God. Some in the visible church were not true Christians while some true Christians existed outside visible manifestations of the church. And yet it has been a consistent instinct of modernism to make the invisible visible in the form of denominations, pan-denominational bodies, ecumenical ventures and networks.

Denominational allegiance is then justified in the name of a commitment to the universal church and often simply 'to the church'. A good 'churchman', and it usually is a man, is someone committed to denominational structures. I remember asking a staff member of an international evangelical network why it existed. What was striking about his reply was that he could not provide an answer in terms of the functions it fulfilled, only in terms of an instinctive feeling that such a body ought to exist.

In contrast the apostolic churches displayed a high level of connexity without centralizing structures. They were constantly exchanging news with one another. They collaborated together in mission and provided relief to congregations in need. Individuals were sent from one church to another to provide encouragement and correction.

It might be argued that the so-called 'Council of Jerusalem' in Acts 15 is an example of centralized authority. But it could also be read as one church seeking advice from another, especially since the problem arose from some who went from the Jerusalem church (Acts 15:24). This latter reading is borne out by the whole tenor of Paul's epistle to the Galatians. Galatians 1 and 2 are explicitly written to establish the fact that Paul does not need the authentication of the Jerusalem apostles. And, as we have seen, in Galatians 4 Paul asserts that the 'mother church' is not 'the present city of Jerusalem,' but 'the Jerusalem that is above' (Galatians 4:26).

Yet Paul could never be accused of isolationism. Not only did he plant churches across the Roman world, but he continued to be involved with them and encourage links between them. Nowhere is this connexity expressed more than in the Jerusalem collection into which Paul poured considerably time and energy. The Jerusalem collection was not simply an expression of concern for the poor. Paul asked the Romans to pray that it will be well received (Romans 15:31) because its reception was in doubt if the Jewish believers would not recognize the Gentile believers. Its primary intention was to embody the unity of Jewish and Gentile Christian within one universal church.

The apostolic church expressed the universal character of the church without centralising structures or authorities through the self-organizing links between congregations.

At the risk of seeming gratuitously trendy, I want to suggest that the Internet offers us an alternative way of imaging the universal church – a way that is consistent with the apostolic pattern. No-one can doubt the impact of the web on all aspects of our lives. Business to business Internet links are dramatically reducing commercial costs. E-commerce is creating, almost instantaneously, companies to rival long established brands. Campaigning groups can organize and share information without government censorship or control. Researchers can exchange information and collaborate as never before. And the possibilities for leisure are

enormous, if sometimes disturbing.

Yet the Internet has no central control. It has no headquarters; no force masterminding its development; no institution running it. It consists of lots of computers and the links between them. The links are not organized in any hierarchical or centralised network. They are self-organizing. Contributors to the network create those links in an *ad hoc* way.

Architects talk of geodesic domes, structures built of interlinking struts without a central support or supports. The Internet is just such a geodesic network. It is linked not through a central point, but in a myriad of ways. This is what gives it its strength. If one of the links goes down, traffic is routed through other links. The web is invisible and without central control: yet it is perhaps the social phenomenon of our age.

One of the things that makes the Internet so successful is its culture of reciprocity and openness. To some extent this may be changing as it becomes a commercial phenomenon. But whether it is a researchers exchanging ideas, businesses collaborating to reduce costs or simply Webmasters linking to each other's sites, reciprocity remains a key value. Its development is dependent entirely on the open exchange of ideas and sharing of developments without concern for personal gain.

I am not trying to argue that the Internet is an unmitigated social good. Clearly it is not. With the presence of pornography, violent and racist material, its potential for criminal collaboration and the prospect of reinforcing social exclusion through an information apartheid it carries with it many dangers.

Nor am I proposing the web as a way of 'doing' the universal church or a way of expressing the universal nature of the church although no doubt it offers some possibilities in this area. Instead I am interested in the Web as a way of imaging the universal church. I use the word 'imaging', despite it being somewhat clumsy, because 'imagining' implies something that does not really exist and an alternative like 'viewing' implies something that can be seen.

What the Internet offers is a way of imaging the church as a network without central control or organization. Just as the Internet consists of computers and the links between them so the universal church, prior to the eschaton, consists of churches and the links between them. Those links need no central control or organization. That was the assumption of modernism. It assumed that if the universal church was to have any reality then it must be expressed in associations, denominations, networks and parachurch bodies. The web gives us an alternative model – a way of expressing connexity without central organization.

Parachurch structures still have a place in this model, but only as long as they do not aggregate to themselves the functions of the universal church. In discussing the challenges of postmodernity we asked whether mission lay in the hands of Christ's little flock, the church of the poor. Now the question is whether the universal church

is in the hands of local churches and the links they choose to make or whether it lies in the hands of denominations and parachurch bodies.

I am not pointing to the web as simply another metaphor of the universal church. Rather I am suggesting that our current ways of imaging the universal church on earth look inadequate in the light of the critique of postmodernism. The web offers us an alternative model for the universal church. It demonstrates that it is possible to envisage connexity apart from central structures or organization. A church in the UK might link up with a church in Brazil working with street children. Together they might seek advice from a local network in Kenya. Modernism wants to organize such links into a meta-network; it wants to quantify them; it cannot quite accept that they can flourish without mediation. What the Internet offers is a model for how such *ad hoc* connexity can work and work effectively.

Conclusion

This article has highlighted the way globalisation and urbanization force us to re-examine the identity of the church – its 'ecclesiality' – both at a local and wider level. These questions are not merely of theoretical interest. They impinge on the bread and butter issues of those involved in mission to the marginalized.

In answering these questions we must renew our confidence in the *ecclesia crucis*. The future of mission does not lie in grand strategies or meta-structures. Christ is building his church, for the most part unseen, in the shape of thousands of small congregations. In this there is hope: the sovereignty of the risen Christ and 'the church of the poor'.

I have a copy of a sketch by Bill Crooks, Tearfund's Capacity Building Specialist, of a slum church in India he visited called 'The Valley of Praise'. The leaders live in a one-room home. The church meets in a room above. Across the narrow passage outside is a room that houses an HIV/AIDS clinic. Bill has written:

This is an amazing place tucked among the slum passages. It has an upper room which can fit a congregation of 50-60 at a squeeze. This room doubles up for pre-school classes, over night accommodation for street children, clinic and a small library of literature.

This, it seems to me, corresponds to the New Testament vision both of mission and of church. This is the vehicle for Christian hope in our world. The kingdom of God has been given to Christ's little flock.

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Footnotes

1 C René Padilla, 'The Church of the Poor' (unpublished paper, 1999), p. 4.

2 Richard Tiplady, 'Let X = X: Generation X and World

Mission' (unpublished paper, 2000).

3 Tearfund UK, *Operating Principles* (1999).

4 Emil Brunner, *The Mediator* (London: Lutterworth, 1934), p. 435.