

THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH

The mission or work of the Church in the world is defined on page 553 of the Book of Common Prayer as "...to offer to God on behalf of all men the worship which is his due; to make known to all men the Gospel of Jesus Christ; and to unite all men to God in one family."¹ In *Interpreting the Present Time: History, the Bible, and the Church's Mission Today*, Cyril Powles maintains that mission currently faces a crisis.²

The purpose of this paper is to describe my vision of the mission of the Church, with reference to Powles, and of my place within it. I will begin by considering Powles' thesis.

Powles' View of the Church's Mission

Powles notes there is a perception that the great missionary movement to spread the "Good News" throughout the earth appears to have run down. Fewer people offer themselves for overseas service.³ The ties of overseas mission to imperialism make some feel guilty. A closer contact with non-Christian faiths, both in Canada and abroad, makes proselytizing problematic.

On the domestic front, surveys such as Reginald Bibby's *Fragmented Gods*, suggest that Canadians see the church primarily as a local community organization to serve their needs, rather than as the body of those called to follow Christ.⁴ They want the local parish to hatch them, match them and dispatch them, to counsel them in times of trouble, and to provide a venue for the festivals of Christmas and Easter. The few who do attend Church, Powles notes, see it as an escape from the everyday world of competition, strife and change. Consequently, they do not welcome sermons that disturb that atmosphere by

¹ The General Synod of the Anglican Church of Canada, "A Supplementary Instruction to the Catechism", *The Book of Common Prayer*, (Toronto: The Anglican Book Centre, 1962), 553

² Cyril H. Powles, *Interpreting the Present Time: History, The Bible and the Church's Mission Today*, (Toronto: The Anglican Book Centre, 1994), 9

³ *ibid*

⁴ *ibid*, 9-10

raising issues related to the outside world, such as the Christian's Mission, or the abolition of poverty and injustice.⁵

In the traditional view, mission was a response to the "Great Commission" "Go ye into the world and preach the gospel to every creature". It was the duty of all Christians to obey that command; however, overseas service was seen as the duty of elite group – the missionaries, while ordinary Christians could support the work with money and prayer. The world could be divided into two areas: Christendom, Heathendom. Mission was seen as territorial expansion through the conquest of Heathendom; in which an institutional church was transplanted with all its Western accoutrements onto new soil. Expansion took place by the conversion of individuals⁶

These assumptions were held within the context of a highly complex pattern of economic, political and ideological forces, which continually shifted their relationship to each other as societies developed. Since almost all missionary enterprises started with some prior commercial or colonial commitment, the spread of Christianity and of Western Civilization appeared indistinguishable. This led to other attitudes, like racial superiority; while a rising standard of living in the West, resulting from technology and capitalist financial accumulation, became interpreted as 'civilization'.⁷

Powles maintains that the struggle for freedom and independence by nations once dominated by the West has called our accepted assumptions about mission into question.⁸ He says, "Where we preached salvation (liberation), we have brought colonial and economic oppression ... Where we preached peace, a crescendo of warfare has ensued ... We have extolled the blessedness of the poor while we increasingly profited and grew rich at their expense."⁹ Perhaps most damning, "Where we promised that in Christ there would be no difference of race or class, we have raised up whole states such as South Africa, or situations such as those in which our own native people find themselves,

⁵ Powles, 10

⁶ *ibid*, 11

⁷ *ibid*, 12

⁸ *ibid*, 14

⁹ *ibid*

founded on racial discrimination and domination of the many by the privileged few.”¹⁰ As Christians, we stood by and washed our hands at excesses of imperialism; and we did not reject the riches that accrued as a result.

Powles points out that society changes so rapidly that even eternal truths seem threatened.¹¹ He maintains that Christians who respond to change as if it did not happen have forgotten their vow to follow Christ, who embraced human life with all the changes and chances that involves. In fact, he says “Christ’s birth, life, death and resurrection provides us with a model of salvation (liberation): not by running away from, but by becoming involved with and grappling with change.”¹² Moreover, Paul shocked the first generation church by proposing gentiles may become Christians without being circumcised. Later, St. Athanasius introduced new ways of describing Christ’s nature that were just as new to biblical tradition as Paul’s had been – i.e. Christ was both human and divine, of one substance with the Father. This was accepted over time, though not without opposition, even violent struggle. The Church’s history is littered with many similar cases.¹³ As Powles says, “only God is absolute: all else is subject to change and limitation.”¹⁴

Today, we live in world where a relative few possess enormous wealth, and have the political and economic power to decide how technology shall be operated. The rest of us are excluded from all but token control over our own lives.¹⁵ Economic inequality now extends into political sphere, and there is a radical division between rich and poor nations. The intolerable suffering in Bangladesh, Ethiopia or sub-Saharan Africa is illustrative of a world system created by capitalism and backed up by science and technology. Powles notes it is no wonder that third world people attempt, by violence if necessary, to free themselves from the vicious cycle of debt and poverty resulting from

¹⁰ Powles, 15

¹¹ *ibid*, 24

¹² *ibid*, 25

¹³ *ibid*, 26

¹⁴ *ibid*, 29

¹⁵ *ibid*, 32

transnational concentration of power.¹⁶ However, the drive toward liberation is often squelched by oppressive regimes backed by high technology from advanced nations to maintain the power of a wealthy minority against the poverty of the majority.¹⁷

For Christians, In Powles view, the drive for liberation – whether among the nations of the Third World, among native people and women of our own land, or on the part of any repressed minority or class - becomes something significantly theological, analogous to the liberation of the Children of Israel from Egypt.¹⁸ He believes that Christianity today is like salt that has lost its bite because it often finds itself on the side of the rich, rather than the poor. He notes where the opposite is true one can usually see new life emerging. In fact an important touchstone for where God is at work today is to discover where “monarchs are being dethroned and the poor are being exalted”.¹⁹

Over 50 years ago, he notes, the Archbishop of Canterbury, William Temple, said in effect that God is not primarily concerned about *religion* but about the whole created order.²⁰ In fact, to paraphrase Temple, God is interested only incidentally in how fast an institutional church is growing in a given part of the world. God is more concerned about: fresh drinking water; liberation from disease, poverty and war; freedom and creative community.²¹

Today, Powles believes, the Christian call for repentance and conversion includes the demand to struggle for structural change – for the overthrow of unjust and sinful systems – as well as for deep personal change. Surely, he asserts, what he is describing is spirituality in the context of the two great commandments: Love God, and love your neighbour.²²

Illustrations of God at work in the modern era include: the struggle of the Third World for liberation; the struggle for liberation of minorities within society – the Mayans in Mexico, the Tamils in Sri Lanka, the Catholics in Northern Ireland,

¹⁶ Powles, 34

¹⁷ *ibid*, 35

¹⁸ *ibid*, 36

¹⁹ *ibid*, 45

²⁰ *ibid*, 50

²¹ *ibid*, 52

²² *ibid*, 53

the recognition of worth in Gay and Lesbian relations, respect for those marked with physical or mental differences, and permission for creative social eccentricity; Women's liberation; the Peace Movement; and the Integrity of Creation.²³ Our involvement in the Church's mission in these areas – particularly the Peace Movement - may require acts of civil disobedience as displayed by Ghandi, Martin Luther King or the Berrigan brothers – refusal to pay taxes, invading factories making weapons, or invading military bases where weapons of mass destruction stored. Was not Jesus nailed to cross, he asks, for breaking the law of the land?²⁴

Powles believes that the abolition of poverty is a moral question for Christians today. Moreover, the Church's mission is no longer a question of evangelizing the unbelievers, but of calling the unjust to repentance.²⁵ He opines that we Christians have been called to be a kind of counter-culture - To go out from this world of false values, and work out our own vision of what God's commonwealth will be like. "Our faith", he says, "demands works."²⁶

A Gospel to present the Good News to North Americans, Powles believes, must be pitched to the affluent – to work for freedom from violence; release from the sense of alienation and powerlessness; and create a new society where each can participate in the political process and basic economic decisions affecting our lives.²⁷ Because of the spread of automation in office and factory, there is little hope that unemployment will disappear. Without long-term structural change and an alteration of unjust trade patterns there will be no relief for the poor. Preaching repentance and conversion for North Americans will include a willingness to change such structures; including our willingness to agree to movements for autonomy and self-sufficiency in third world countries that may result in the lowering of our own standard of living (and further add to the unemployment here).²⁸ We must also address racism, classism and sexism.

²³ Powles, 55-58

²⁴ *ibid*, 58

²⁵ *ibid*, 60

²⁶ *ibid*, 61

²⁷ *ibid*, 70

²⁸ *ibid*, 71

The most effective way to proclaim such a gospel is by example - in the kind of lives that ordinary Christians live; in a lifestyle that reflects real freedom, integrity, and joy in a world where dishonesty, fear, insecurity, and tension are the rule. Lives that have been 'renewed and transformed' will form a counter-culture of non-conformity pointing to a new way for those who are oppressed by the old."²⁹

Powles' Christian counter-culture would be a call to take up our cross (to become an opponent of the status quo) and follow Christ here and now in identification with the poor and marginalized as the height of what it means to be spiritual.³⁰ He notes that Christian opposition to the status quo means something more than simple opposition to present government and economic structures, though it will often include that. It is a steady refusal to accept standards of authority, as Jesus did. The cross we are to take up represents the criticism, ostracism, even martyrdom we are must be prepared to receive if we follow the way.³¹

Consumer Resistance would be an important tool of such non-conformity – an important way to demonstrate our adherence to a new set of values based on the gospel – particularly since consumerism is the basis on which the society Christian should oppose functions. Powles opines that Christians can practice owning fewer goods and avoid impulse buying; thereby emphasizing quality of life over unlimited acquisitions.³²

The new way would eliminate Sexism, Paternalism, and discrimination against gays and lesbians. Powles notes that the Christian counter-culture, with nonconformist spirituality and holistic world-view will practice unlimited reverence for human worth and root out unconscious attitudes of discrimination and superiority.³³

Finally, in working to achieve these ends, Christians will find it natural to be involved with non-Christians in secular movements, like the peace movement,

²⁹ Powles, 73

³⁰ *ibid*, 74

³¹ *ibid*, 75

³² *ibid*, 77

³³ *ibid*, 79-80

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movements for native rights and the women's movement all of which struggle for human worth.

My View of the Mission of the Church

In my view, the mission of the Church is that defined in the Book of Common Prayer - to offer to God on behalf of all people the worship which is his due; to make known to all people the Gospel of Jesus Christ; and to unite all people to God in one family. It is the role of the Church to be the living presence of Christ in the world. He has no other hands, no other eyes, no other tongue. It is through the Church his work will be done on earth.

By Church, I do not necessarily mean the Anglican Church of Canada, nor even the worldwide Anglican communion; but rather, the communion of all believers.

I also recognize that God works through other faiths, from other traditions and cultures, for as the Gospel of John states "all things were made through him and without him was not anything made that was made." (John 1:1). All people, of all races, creeds and colours were created by and are children of God, although they may not follow the particular creed I espouse. Nevertheless, the spirit of God dwells in every one.

In carrying out its mission the Church, and its members, are required to live the two Great Commandments – Love God and Love one's neighbour. To me that love for neighbour means to see Christ in everyone I meet, and to do my best to treat that person as I would want to be treated; without reservation or hesitation.

In light of the above, I believe that part of the Church's mission is to witness to whatever is not done in the spirit of God, and to work to change it, by all means compatible with my Christian faith.

As to my role in the Church, I am seeking ordination. According to the Book of Common Prayer, a Priest's role is to minister to the people committed to his care by the Bishop, to lead them in the worship of God and to preach his Word, to baptize, to celebrate the Holy Communion, and to pronounce

Absolution and Blessing in God's name.³⁴ A Deacon's function is to assist the Bishop or Priest in the Divine Service and in other ministrations to the people of God.³⁵ The work of a lay member is to take part in the worship of the Church, its labours, and councils, according to the gifts of grace God has provided and to pray, work and give for the spread of his kingdom.³⁶

At present, as a lay member, I participate in the worship of the Church on a regular basis as a member of the congregation, a sidesman and an acolyte. I have sat on advisory board in several different capacities in the past. I am also actively involved in mission work in Sri Lanka as a director of the India Christian Mission, with particular responsibility for the work of the Paynter Children's Home, where I have volunteered for several months each year. I have also actively participated in programs in Canada working with the separated and divorced and the unemployed.

As a Priest, I expect to fulfill the role contemplated in the Prayer Book definition. In addition, I expect to lead whatever congregation that may be committed to my charge in their Christian witness, education and outreach. As part of my pastoral duties, I would expect to educate my congregation in the basics of the other major faiths, to promote cross-cultural understanding and lessen racial and sectarian tensions in a multi-ethnic society like ours. I believe that it is the unknown that causes misunderstanding and dislike in such situations.

My belief is that I should lead by example, and that the most effective way of spreading the Good News to the unchurched is by living the Christian Life fully and publicly; and speaking out about whatever contravenes the Summary of the Law.

I do have particular concerns that I would seek to address as a Priest. I am concerned about the education of children, both within the church and in the secular society. I believe that the Judeo-Christian tradition has been the greatest civilizing force in the Western world in the last 2,000 years, and that our society is

³⁴ ibid

³⁵ BCP, 553

³⁶ ibid

in danger of losing its understanding of its roots as it removes all vestiges of Christianity from the school system and from government. Without an understanding of that tradition, I question how one can understand our laws, government and society, all of which were established on its principles. I will actively work to re-establish those principles in the public sphere. In addition, I will work to get the Christian Church into the education “business”. In my opinion the future of the Church depends on the education of our children in a learning environment that is not contrary to the teaching they receive in their homes and in Sunday School.

As to the role of Mission, in the traditional sense, I believe that faith and cultural differences notwithstanding, there is still a significant role for the Christian Church to play. From my experience in Sri Lanka, and from what I have seen in India, the Christian missionary was not entirely a servant of the Empire. Often they served selflessly, with little pay and creature comforts, to build hospitals, dispensaries and schools. In an article I read several years ago in India Today (I cannot provide the citation) that discussed the problem of “Conversion” it was clearly stated that a major attraction of the Christian Church in India – the single thing that brought Indians to want to join it – was the social outreach that the Christian missionaries provided, without thought of the faith background of the recipient. Hinduism did not provide these things, and does little today to do so; neither does Buddhism in Sri Lanka; and in particular not with regard to members of other faith backgrounds.

Two years ago, an Anglican priest brought a “mission team” to Sri Lanka to do some work for our Children’s Home. The team included a dental clinic. In 5 days one dentist pulled over 560 teeth on 4 tea estates and at the Paynter Homes. People of every faith background who were in need of dental care were treated. The Buddhist government has not yet provided any follow up care for Tea estate workers, most of whom are Hindu, and who are poorly paid. This is the aspect of mission that Powles does not appear to understand – service to others, grounded in our Christian witness, without any strings attached. It also happens to be a very powerful tool for evangelizing, which is why – in part –

legislation to ban “conversion” is currently being proposed in both India and Sri Lanka.

For this reason, in particular, I am not in substantial agreement with the argument Powles makes in his book. I also question his complete lack of acknowledgement of the attack being made on Christianity in our own country by agnostics and atheists under the guise of not making things uncomfortable for immigrants of other faiths, In becoming welcoming to others I do not believe that it is necessary to proscribe our own faith, as is presently happening in the school system and in government. Finally, I find the lack of any attention given to children in his thesis to be incomprehensible.

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