

Celtic Bridges to the Future: Questions.

Our task is to go back over a page, a chapter of the story to recover an important piece of memory and to look for the movement of God.

The Spiritual Search.

The universal quest.
The inner revelation
The converted imagination
The earthed Spirituality

Questions:

The Creator's Ecology

Questions:

Relating to Culture

A Christian model
Cross-cultural mission

Questions:

The Mission/New Monasticism.

Questions:

Opening Prayer.

With the saints, we believe and trust
In God the father who made all things.

We believe and trust in Him.

With the saints, we believe and trust
in His Son Jesus Christ who redeemed the world.

We believe and trust in Him.

With the saints, we believe and trust
in the Holy spirit who gives life to the people of God.

We believe and trust in Him.

This is the faith of the saints of God.

This is our faith.

**We believe and trust in one God,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen**

Celtic Bridges to the Future



*Paper given at Kernewek Lowender
Celtic Workshop Retreat, May 2011*

E .A. (Ted) Curnow

God's love made known in Christ and made present in the Holy Spirit will remain the power for future mission.

Questions

Discuss: It's not so much a matter of what we do but of discovering who we are as God's people

How can your Church be reshaped to be a Community that:-

- 1. Is a Mission Out-post.**
- 2. Preserves a knowledge of the Gospel.**
- 3. Trains people for mission?**

*Rev E A (Ted) Curnow
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differences between these two expressions of Christianity. Rome with its **imposing style of evangelism** wanted uniformity of practice with more rigid government. The Celtic Church with a more Incarnational grass roots, Abbot-lay ministry approach (*Abbots were elected by the Monks*) with an intrinsic spirituality were less structured and **mission based rather than power based**.

Most historians mark the Synod of Whitby in C664 as the time when the tide turned on Celtic Christianity. As more monasteries became Roman they became less effective at evangelism.

Our society today is being radically changed. Institutions and power bases are shifting. Information and power are being decentralised. Networking and relationships are the new language of growth and development. In focusing mission with this generation, churches are going to need to become less hierarchical, patriarchal, institutional and rigid. Congregations will need to be relational, using a range of gifts and providing pastoral leadership from within their own ranks. (*With less focus on status leadership*) Synods can no longer set directions for congregations by sponsoring uniform programmes. Congregations themselves will set the kind of indigenous direction, which is appropriate.

With today's fragmentation of culture and the need for local forms of community, some have suggested that it is time to consider **the formation of a new monasticism** where local congregations, rather than being places where Christians withdraw from the world become **mission outposts**, insuring a sustained **knowledge of the gospel** and being **training centres for mission** teams. These new community centres would have more in common with Monasticism than 11 am Sunday only congregations.

Monastic communities have arisen in different eras in response to discerning the historical circumstances of the time. During World War 2 the Confessing Church Seminar that was directed by Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a Monastic Community. Simply renouncing hierarchical power structures and reorganising church in itself of course is impossible and irresponsible. The Church of the future will be diverse reaching beyond one specific model. What we can be certain about is that the power of

Celtic Bridges to the Future

Introduction

The Christian Church in Cornwall has a rich spiritual heritage with its roots in the antiquity of the early Celtic Saints and the Established Church. Non-conformity and Revivalism also has an important place and is very much part of the history of this Copper Triangle community.

A Christian perspective of life and history claims that beyond the story of our own lives a bigger story is unfolding. Rather than a series of haphazard events or a mere combination of facts it is more like a narrative story that has purpose because it fits into a bigger picture of the Divine Author.

Our task is to interpret the story, to go back over a page, a chapter of the story to recover an important piece of memory and to **look for the movement of God**. Our task is to draw meaningful lessons from the Celtic Church Movement to rediscover key rhythms or elements from the past that sit well with scripture and resonate with trends in our contemporary world. We seek helpful bridges from the past that feed into the hunger of our current generation and culture.

This can only be a tricky exercise. Firstly, in its earliest form the Celtic story was not a written history and being "antipodean" we are well removed from the European context so we are not in a good position to untangle facts from myth or nostalgia from legends.

Secondly, the western church today needs to break out of a denial or a survival mentality. Facing meteoric change in our contemporary world requires a paradigm change, not just a new model or strategy but a **new way of thinking**. This workshop is certainly **not meant to be a formula** for the Church of the future but it may enhance new perceptions. Being realistic then, this paper is more likely to be an **entree** or an **introductory taste** limited by assumptions and generalisations than it is a presentation that does full justice to the subject.

Having the courage to listen to our past under the headings of:-The

Spiritual Search. The Creator's Ecology. Relating to Culture and The Mission / New Monasticism. will hopefully challenge the status quo of our own thinking to the point of finding a Celtic bridge to the future.

The Spiritual Search

The Universal Quest

The late Francis Schaeffer once wrote, "People are hungry for something which will give them hope in life. They are also afraid. Things really do seem hopeless, even on the level of everyday life with its threats of a lower standard of living—of famine and ecological disaster they are looking for an answer." (*What happened to the Human Race* p148)

Today we can no longer assume a passing awareness of the Christian tradition. Secular humanism has created a spiritual vacuum so that an **inner quest and search for an authentic spirituality** (*beyond that offered by the average Church Congregation and Judeo-Christian faith*) spans a deep desire for meaning, fulfilment, guidance and personal worth. It takes many forms and touches ecology, medicine, education, nutrition and entertainment.

It has been said, "People hear about meditation cushions, crystals and trance mediums. What they don't understand is that they're talking about their next door neighbour" (*Ageing of Aquarius* p37)

The Inner Revelation

What is known as the Celtic St John tradition has an emphasis on the Light that enlightens every person coming into the world and God as the essence of the life of the world. This led the Celtic Church to look for the grace of God within as well as beyond the creation. The concept of listening for the **heartbeat of God** within all things, within ourselves and the whole creation was a feature of Celtic spirituality. In the rising of the morning sun God spoke of grace and beginnings, and in the fertility of the earth is a sign of how life wells up from within a person from the unknown place of God. This deepest aspect of our being often defies a neat and tidy explanation but it could be said besides **general revelation** and the **special revelation** of Christ and the Scriptures there is, a **third**

ministry, architecture and pastoral theology---but culture exegesis and reflection on mission did not shape church life" ('Post-Christendom' Stuart Murray' p.251)

As a dominant institution the Church expected culture to adapt to the Church. Where we have inherited this form of Church, we find it increasingly relates to a diminishing group of white, middle class conformists. Christians in all traditions are asking searching questions about the shape and future of the Church. There is a **gaping chasm between the church and contemporary culture**. In the workplace or with our friends it is true to say many Aussies find Church irrelevant and archaic. Christianity is being pushed more and more to the sidelines as a private pursuit for people who "like that sort of thing."

Because society is increasingly fragmented and diverse Congregations each have to discover their own mission and a shape, which relates to their particular circumstance. Congregations will need to be more specific about what they offer and to whom.. Although many remain in a state of denial it is clear God is renewing us for mission in a time of cultural turbulence. This is not so much a matter of what we do but of discovering who we are as God's people thus seeking the bridge between Celtic Christianity and our contemporary lives come into focus.

St Patrick and later Celtic missionaries using an incarnational approach undertook some of the earliest missions in Ireland. Cahill says, "*Patrick found a way of swimming down to the depths of the Irish psyche and warming and transforming Irish imagination --- making it more human and noble while keeping it Irish.*" (*Irish Saved Civilisation* p 115)

Patrick used apostolic mission teams that led to Irish monks travelling to South Wales. Eventually Columba went to Iona, then to Northumbria, Lindisfarne, England. A network of Monasteries emerged in the 6th and 7th centuries. Monasteries trained and sent out teams to establish new faith communities. Cornwall benefited from a number of Saints and Monastic settlements providing hospitality and training. Despite human failure, (*unlike the Roman Church*) these leaders were **devoted to Jesus Christ rather than a world wide institution**.

Pope Gregory, Bishop of Rome having enormous power sent Augustine and a Church planting team to Canterbury, England. There were marked

into a culture” (*The Celtic Way of Evangelism*’ p 77)

So it is important to note that Christianity is not a culture bound inflexible faith, which must be imposed on culture in the same way as Islam or Judaism for instance. In the culture wars of our time it is easy for Christian people to be negative and defensive, resisting change as if there is something that we can call pure Christian culture. Rather than compromising or being syncretistic we need to know that every part of humanity has been touched by sin and needs redemption. All culture then needs to aim at being Christ centred.

An example of this flexibility is found in the traditional Celtic cross, with the circle of the sun pierced by the cross of redemption. It is a traditional symbol which communicates many different things but it seems to us to reflect that Jesus himself is the Lord of Creation. Creation itself has been pierced by the cross of salvation and Jesus himself is supreme and authoritative over all the elemental spirits. The Celts took a common pagan symbol and reinterpreted it for the gospel.

The emerging Church of the post-modern world will need to integrate **cultural sensitivity** and a **counter cultural radicalism** that understands minority sub-cultures like the aboriginal Church. It will need to walk the fine line of being prophetic and pursuing justice while being true to the traditional good news of the gospel.

Questions

What sub-culture could you adopt or attempt to understand in order to be a “translator” for Christ?

How is the Church and our evangelism today often culture bound?

The Mission/New Monasticism

“In Christendom, engaging in mission and interacting with culture were secondary concerns. There was a gulf between Church and mission. Church was primary; culture was a hospitable environment shaped by the Church’s story. Congregations delegated mission to other agencies. There were many discussions about Church, doctrine, authority, sacraments,

tradition. This is a direct, inner and **intuitive revelation** of God that brings the wonders of creation and the letter of Scripture to life through the inner work of the Spirit of God (*Rom 1: 20*). Indeed without this inner revelation of the Spirit we do not know the revelation of God. (*John 16:13, Rom, 8:16,1 Cor 2: 13,14*) There is a sense in which revelation only completes its purpose when it is received so that faith was **not only a memory** of the great things done by Jesus Christ but also a sense of **life lived in His presence** and the presence of God here and now.

“The beautiful work of art may be finished, framed and displayed but until someone looks at the masterpiece and perceives it’s beauty and it’s greatness, the picture is not fulfilled.”

Instead of the Western World’s materialism where matter is regarded as the essence of life and may or may not give rise to spiritual thought and expression, the Celtic view was that relationship with God and the spiritual dimension was at the heart of life and that the more we looked into matter the closer we came to God. In some ways this a right brain, left brain distinction. For many in the main line Church today this perception in which we clearly hear God speak to us will require a radical shift, a moving away from a cerebral church culture to an awareness more typical of a ‘Charismatic’ style spirituality.

The Converted Imagination

For George Fox, founder of the Society of Friends true Christianity was to be found with the discovery of the inner light; outward sacramentalism was worthless and did not lead towards true godliness. (*“Prophetic Lifestyle and Celtic Way”* p 67) Dreams and visions were also a legitimate part of biblical revelation and important to the life of the Celtic Church. Dreams were not something rare or for special occasions but a normal everyday part of life. Dreams were the way the Creator communicated with his creation and an ascetic life style that used poetry, story, symbol, song, imagination and contemplation were all used as a *discovery faculty* for seeing meanings and a way of prayer often learnt from monastic communities.

Karl Barth spoke of the **conversion of the imagination** as a re-alignment of our hearts, minds and affections to the new reality of God’s coming

Kingdom. So today we need to be people whose identity is formed by the Biblical tradition rather than the culture around us and we need to listen to people on the edge. This is where the apostle, the prophet, and the poet are found.

“Today’s post-modern world regards the Christian story as just another oppressive meta-narrative. This view must be challenged with a new focus on the Christian story with the importance of people sharing history and their journeying in an imaginative way. Walter Brueggemann advocates a new creativity and a poetic ministry to help us understand our times and develop radical hope.”

“The practice of --- poetic imagination is the most subversive, redemptive act that a leader can undertake -- -such poets are not mystical dreamers but exercise prophetic and apostolic roles” (“Post Christendom, Stuart Murray p 278)

The Earthed Spirituality

Celtic spirituality was also an **earthed, prophetic spirituality**. While knowledge of God may be more sensory or intuitive this does not mean it was esoteric, or needs to be a warm fuzzy or a secret, private experience. Illustrations of a practical grounded spirituality that is realistically planted in this world are numerous. For instance echoes of Celtic spirituality appear in the high standing St John’s and St Martin’s crosses of Iona. Creation itself and Scripture themes are inseparable. The Scripture and nature images carved on opposite sides of the cross express the desire to hold together the revelation of the **God of creation** and the revelation of the **God in the Bible**. Secondly, Celtic evangelism often happened within the context of **demonstrations of God’s power**. Similar to Elijah’s encounter with the prophets of Baal. It was not unusual for confrontations to take place with the magicians of the day. The challenge was issued and the name of Christ the Lord was invoked. The Celts loved a story and probably embellished some accounts but genuine historical encounters that included **confidence in God’s ‘breaking in power’** was a regular phenomenon.

Ellis and Seaton in their book the “New Celts; Following Jesus into Millennium 3” suggest that, *“We have allowed our minds and hearts to be darkened by the cynicism of our history and are being robbed in these*

1. Herding cattle connected him to the God of creation.
2. He culturally understood Irish Celtic people.
3. He came to love his captors.

These three factors profoundly shaped the Celtic approach to Mission and Culture.

Cross Cultural Mission

After a period of training Patrick became the first missionary Bishop appointed to Ireland in C432, He spoke Irish and his method of mission was indigenous. He respected current culture by consulting with the King of the tribe; he lived with the people, prayed for their sick, mediated conflicts, looked for response and formed faith communities. In other words from the outset Celtic Mission was largely a church planting exercise. The Celtic Missionary saints of Ireland, Wales and Scotland followed a similar pattern that was pro-active. With imagination they creatively blended in as much as possible with local culture. Ellis and Seaton go as far as to say, “Pioneers like Columba and Aidan were not just the original Christian apostles to these islands, they were truly aboriginal apostles. Their expression or orthodox Christianity struck a cord with the people in that they led them into the light of the gospel **in a way that enhanced their roots and identity as Celtic people.**” (*‘Prophetic Lifestyle and the Celtic Way’ p 85*).

While a key debate in the New Testament involved the cultural differences between the practice of Jewish and Gentile believers, the early church was essentially a **grass roots, organic, incarnational church** that released people into their God given cultural identity. (*eg. The role of women in the Early Church.*) *“The missionary task is carried out better when Christians look for that which is of God already within a culture and then demonstrates that Jesus is the fulfilment of all the good which is already there”.*

(Prophetic Lifestyle and the Celtic Way.” p 49)

Hunter says, *“The Biblical revelation was primary, but understanding the people’s cultural and historical context helped them to know what in scripture to feature first and how to “translate” it for the people.” David Bosch observes, “The Christian faith never exists except as ‘translated”*

explains it this way....

*“Twice before the church has been challenged to reorder its understanding of self and world..... looking back with the perspective of history we see a paradigm emerge – the **paradigm of the Apostolic Age**. Generations later, when the new faith became the official faith of the Roman Empire a reorientation occurred throughout the institution. Like the first, that reorientation was the church’s attempt to its social environment and accomplish its mission. **The paradigm of the age of Christendom**. In our time the second paradigm is breaking apart. Its successor, a **third paradigm** is yet to appear fully Times of transition between ages and paradigms are times of confusion and tumult. The task ahead is the reinvention of the church God who called the church out into the Apostolic world 2000 years ago is again calling the Church out this time into a secularised world where mission and its life must be once again redefined”.*

Beyond the church the new era has been marked by new ways of thinking marked by, **post modernism, multi-culturalism and secularism**. Today we live in a constant cultural ferment, a context of rapid change that effects our attitudes, values and decision making towards relationships, life styles, priorities, employment, marriage, families etc.

How do Christians then as a minority group in a world where they are increasingly marginalised relate to people who are different?

A Christian Model

Cross cultural mission seems to have been the heart beat of Celtic Christianity. Celtic Christians were apostles to the pre-Christian tribal people of Ireland, Cornwall and the British Isles so our task is closely paralleled to the mission of Wales, of Iona and Lindisfarne. Celtic Christians appeared to have walked the line between being compassionate, but uncompromising, being affirming of life and yet not worldly. They mixed austerity and humanity. This way of operating emerged early as part of Patrick’s experience who has been called the founding father of the Celtic Church. Born somewhere in West Britain around C390, when he was 16 he was kidnapped and sold into slavery in Ireland where three profound changes took place.

areas. The Celtic Christian movement offers a reminder and now calls us to account” (p 137).

After talking about the importance of prophetic poets and storytellers and how the church has often marginalised these people Stuart Murray concludes “As long as many see **risk taking** as adverse to **faith in God**, prophetic direction, God’s sovereignty or wise pastoral practise, experimentation will be limited”----A criticism of emerging churches is that **few are radical** enough in their **engagement with culture** or **ecclesiological creativity**----we need riskier experiments to grapple with the challenges and opportunities of post-modernism. (*“Post Christendom”*, Stuart Murray p 281)

In the search for spirituality Bishop Nigel MacCulloch suggests that ... *“it is not so much that people do not believe in God, but that they do not find the churches credible”* Celtic spirituality then challenges us with a spirituality that brings the words we utter and the life style we live together in a more realistic, authentic way (*“Provocative Church”*, Graham Tomlin p 10)

Questions

Contemplation can be described as “basking” in the presence of God. How do you bask in the presence of God or listen to God’s “heartbeat”?

List areas where your faith can lead to risk-taking and where your spirituality engages with the world.

The Creator’s Ecology

The Church with the secular world has allowed itself to drift towards an ecological dark age of climate chaos. A transformed understanding of the world around us that addresses human self- interest, greed, consumerism and distortion is beyond question. Andy Phillips in *“Celtic Christianity Today”* says, *“We must be careful in case fear of catastrophe panics us into selfish, short term responses to our current*

global dilemma.” He refers to Jonathon Porritt of Friends of the Earth who said nearly a generation ago that we need a new spirituality if our world is to survive, a new way of seeing our world. A powerful response to our current ecological problems could do much to restore a right relationship with creation.

While solitude and asceticism was important, Celtic monks adapted themselves to share a holistic integrated way of life. There was no room for a secular/sacred divide. There was no such thing as secular music or secular farming. While gifts can be used for good or evil and God’s image in creation has been flawed through sin and rebellion, living was out worked in an environment of worship to the Lord. The basic reality was that “The earth is the Lord’s” (Psalm 24: 1)The “Carmina Gadelica”(the songs and poems of the Gaels) had prayers for milking, washing, fishing, lighting a fire. Creation was regarded as good. Before a parting or journey the people would pray,

The goodness of the sea be thine,
The goodness of the earth be thine,
The goodness of heaven be thine.

The life of God was viewed as being deep within creation as well as being distinct from it. The grace of healing was seen as being implanted within the creation. Celebrating Christ in all things the Breast-plate hymn of St Patrick says ,

The three who are in the earth,
The three who are in the air,
The three who are in the heaven.
The three who are in the great pouring sea.

These prayers celebrate the presence of God in the elements but do not confuse God with creation. They are not **pantheistic** (*God being all things*) as there is a distinction between the Creator, the **source of life** and the **living things** --- thus **pan-en-theism** (*God in all things*)

This spirituality with its distinction between God and creation united with a great reverence for creation’s elements. They revered creation without deifying it. Philip Newell points to a practise in the Hebrides well into last century where there was a custom of men taking off their cap to the sun in the morning and women bending the knee to the moon at night. People’s

attention and prayers would very naturally move back and forth between the physical and spiritual. (“*Listening to the Heartbeat of God*”. P 45.

Such prayers convey a sense of the spiritual coming to us in and through the physical. Life was seen as having been created good and there was no hesitation in looking to God at times of festivity for the plentiful supply of food and drink or in offering a night benediction for a blessing on the “bed companion of my love”. “The patterns of heaven and earth were intertwined so to look to God was not to look away from life but to look more deeply into it”. This closeness of God at the heart of creation also extended to the personal closeness of God to people. To look into the face of a newborn child was to see the image of God. A blessing on a child speaks of, “The lovely likeness of the Lord is in thy pure face”.

Living as a Christian today means rejecting the arrogant view that nature has no reason for existence apart from serving us. Living in a Christian way today must involve a new radical repentance, a turning away from self and sin to reconnect with God and with the earth. Only a new simple lifestyle that honours the Creator and respects the natural world can avoid the fatalism of our time that ends up worshipping the environment itself. It means deliberately rejecting an evil consumerism and making sacrifices in order to ‘live simply so that the world can simply live’.

Questions

What does it mean for Christians to adapt to a holistic integrated way of life?

What new way of thinking is required to reject an “evil consumerism”?

Relating to Culture

In the past, our culture changed very slowly. Several successive generations lived in a similar environment. Most of today’s churches and people over 45 years of age are products of the Christendom era. Younger generations belong to the new post Christendom era. Lauren Mead