

A Celtic Model for a Local Church

Western culture is at a turning point. Voices from across the Christian world call for the cradling of a new way that draws on Celtic spirituality, in particular, a Celtic model of the local church may be what the 21st century needs. This paper highlights some focal points of a Celtic model that seem worth exploring further.

- ▶ **Community:** In many churches the focus is the clergyman, the church building, the Sunday service, or a church board. Most attenders think of themselves as independent of these foci for most of the week. In a Celtic church the focus is a core, open-ended community of love which, in greater or lesser measure, eats together, prays together, works together, shares human delights and sorrows together, and carries the whole in its heart through the week. There will be varied expressions of this principle. Some church members will major on career or family responsibilities, but these will interweave with the whole church community. Some churches may have a link with a monastic house; others may have houses grouped around a worship center or workshops which may challenge the housing pattern of the area.
- ▶ **Journey:** In many churches the focus of time and energy is maintenance of a program or building. This produces overload, so that any new leads from the God of pilgrimage are blocked out. In a Celtic church, programs and buildings are provisional; they flow out of Spirit-led initiatives, and when that tide ebbs they are beached. So there is space "in the program" to "waste time for God", and to hear him for the new thing he wants to do.
- ▶ **Access points.** In many a neighborhood a church building, whose architecture and worship is in a style alien to the majority of residents, is the only obvious point of access to Christianity, though most town churches have children's activities. A Celtic church has a variety of Christian presences that appeal to people of different cultures and stages of life. To cite a few examples: wayside shrines, prayer huts, a Christian Kareoke, cafe, child care service, pop concert, holiday club, leisure center, counselling agency, pub, school chaplaincy, retirement club. These will not be autonomous in spirit, they will be part of the weft and warp of the whole tapestry God is weaving.

- ▶ **Hospitality:** In many churches there are people to welcome newcomers at the door on Sunday, but they are not welcomed into the other rooms, as it were, during the week. In a Celtic church there will be a place of prayer that is always open, a communal meal to which all are welcome, a bed for the genuine visitor, and an attitude of acceptance in the members. There might also be a retreat house, a hall or hostel.

- ▶ **Contemplative and Combative Prayer:** Some churches are prayer-less and some have prayer meetings, but too often the surface psychic material in those who come dictates the agenda. In a Celtic church there are contemplatives, who are as valued as typists or teachers. It is normal for some to spend long periods in silent vigil, and for all to spend some time in silent worship; for groups to circle houses, streets, or places which need freeing from the powers of evil, and to use the charismatic gifts.

- ▶ **Signs and blessings.** In many evangelical church symbols and ceremonies have been rejected as part of a dead legalism or of a heretical idolatry. In many catholic churches sacraments have been confined to a rather churchy straitjacket. This has created a vacuum in the corporate psyche which God designed to feed on symbolism. Why should the devil have all the best symbolism? A Celtic church, reflecting Christ's ministry, which overflowed with living symbols, rejoicing in the redemption he brings to all creation and to all the human senses, purified through its desert spirituality, blesses every good thing it can lay hands on. It celebrates the glory of God in painting and poetry, color and sound, movement and music, symbol and drama. It brings back color into the streets; it uses oil, water, fire, the earth and all its fruits. It seeks to re-ignite a Christian imagination.

- ▶ **Worship that reflects history, harmony and humanity.** The worship is deep but not overlaid, militant but gentle; it draws on the liturgical riches of the western and eastern churches, yet is free to reflect local character and spontaneity. It addresses God as Mystery, a Trinity, and yet as Friend. It follows the rhythm of the natural seasons and of the church year, and observe times of fasting or spiritual warfare, of lamentation for the sins and sorrows of society, and of joy and celebration of creation. Praise and the use of psalms are prominent. The imagination is used powerfully so that, for example, Bethlehem comes to the doorstep at Christmas, or Golgotha at Easter. Its prayers reflect the pains and aspirations of the population. It meets for daily prayer, perhaps in the open air.

- ▶ **Orthodox Faith but diverse practice.** The Celtic model does not divorce theology from the daily living out of the Gospel. The core of the Gospel is lived so passionately that little time is wasted in merely theoretical argument about where the boundaries are. It is not imprisoned in a bureaucratic organization; there is freedom to follow local initiatives. Varying approaches and customs in different areas are taken as a natural part of the Christian scene.
- ▶ **People-friendly patterns of evangelism.** This goes with the flow of the natural human networks, affirming all that is good in them. The telling of Good News is in the context of sharing friendship, offering practical social compassion, and a Christian community that models God's kingdom. Pressurized or unnatural techniques are not used.
- ▶ **Roots in the original Christianity of the land.** The Celtic Christians at the Council of Whitby regarded the apostle John, and Columba, as special fathers in the faith; they felt a continuity and kinship with them. A Celtic church is aware of its continuity and kinship with the Jewish, Eastern desert, and Celtic churches, and not locate its primary birthright in later developments (the Catholic/Protestant divide or the liberal Enlightenment). It therefore does not polarize along lines of churchmanship. It celebrates the Celtic saints days and uses the lives of the Celtic saints as sources of inspiration. A church which has no sense of history may still offer a Celtic model, but it will lack this helpful dimension.
- ▶ **Renunciation of power.** All church leaders are prone to confuse their own ego with the will of God, and impose the agenda of their own ego in the guise of religion. In a Celtic church people are led by those who have a Rule of Life which involves renunciation of power. Its members are at ease with themselves and with others. They have a simple, uncluttered life-style. There are no hidden agendas, or judgmental, defensive, triumphalist, feigned or competitive attitudes. There are genuine relations with churches around, regardless of their tradition.
- ▶ **Unity with the universal church.** Most churches are of one denomination, or independent of other churches. Many have structures and mind-sets that are sectarian. A Celtic Church (although having to share in the visible church's fragmentation) is catholic. It encourages all believers to live as one family of Christians, builds trust with other Christian groups, and honors Christian leaders as signs of the link with the apostles and with the universal church.

Further Exploration

We are keen to facilitate further exploration on the theme of this paper and we welcome contributions.

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