

Church – without price?

In the marketplace of consumer choice, John Cole, formerly National Adviser (Unity in Mission) for the Church of England, explores whether the local church is valueless - or priceless!

1. The language of the marketplace

In the last twenty years or more, just about everyone, inside as well as outside the Churches, has started speaking the *language of the marketplace*. It has even got a grip on the way we think and express ourselves.

□ It slips out in colloquial speech more often than we realise: If I don't agree about something, I might say "*I don't buy that!*"

*In the 1960s
the Beatles sang,
"All you need is
love."*

□ It has also found its way into almost all our planning: We readily compare the *costs* and *benefits* of a particular course of action.

*Today, most people
don't buy that!*

Back in the 1980s government and businesses set about re-inventing the citizen as an individual *consumer* - and most of us seem to have been very content with the change in role. We have all, at least to some extent, succumbed to the myth that the key to happiness is to grab a bargain.

Almost unnoticed, this new discourse has changed what people expect from a local church. And, more profoundly, it has dramatically changed the way we understand ourselves.

2. Shopping round for a local church

National consumer surveys routinely list religion as a 'leisure pursuit'. When churchgoers move house, they will often '*shop*

around' for the local church that suits them best. All this turns the local church into something between a leisure centre and a retail outlet.

The local church becomes a venue that individuals *patronise* for what they can get out of it - whether they take what's on offer as 'spiritual fitness' or something more like 'eternal life assurance'. Ouch!

The Chinese word for 'religion' also means 'insurance.'

We pay premiums now for life hereafter.

3. The nearly Godly Chamber of Trade!

The language of the marketplace gives us a fresh way of interpreting recent church history:

Throughout the 20th century the institutional Churches in England have struggled to '*stay in business*' in the context of a *declining market*.

After the appalling experience of the First World War, people were less inclined to assume that they would be 'improving themselves' or even just 'doing the respectable thing' by going to church. Until then the notion of 'Christendom' had for hundreds of years maintained a *monopoly* in English life, either through the established Church of England or through Nonconformist dissent. Now it was fast being eroded, and one way the Churches coped with the change was by looking for Christian unity.

Stage One: A take-over

Immediately after WW1, the Church of England attempted what to all appearances was a '*take-over*.' The Lambeth Conference of 1922 issued "A call to all Christian People." It amounted to an invitation to 'come home to mother.' The English Free Churches responded surprisingly positively. Less surprisingly, the Pope's response was derisory. The whole process might

even have worked, had it not been cut short by the Second World War.

Stage Two: A merger

As part of the mood for reconciliation after WW2, ‘take-over’ was replaced by ‘merger’. Unity schemes, pioneered in the newly de-colonised India, were eagerly pursued. It was very much like the quest for union amongst the western European countries. But, when it came to the final moment of decision, a minority of clergy within the Church of England’s General Synod couldn’t face merging with the Methodists (1972) or making a covenant commitment with four of the Free Churches (1982).

Stage Three: A cartel

In trading terms, what emerged after these failures was more like a ‘cartel’.

In 1990 ‘Churches Together’ structures were set up with the full participation of the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches. The different Christian traditions committed themselves to working together in increasingly difficult trading conditions.

Since then, consumer choice has extended to include all the world religions in a multi-faith society, and people are selling ‘pick and mix’ spiritualities to choosy consumers in this ‘New Age’. After all, why be shackled to the supposedly life-negating rule-books of the old religions when you can create your own?

Imagine

*... visiting the meeting of clergy and ministers
associated with the local Churches Together Group.*

*It almost feels like a Chamber of Trade’
(back to the notion of selling ‘eternal life assurance!’)*

The Roman Catholic priest claims a proprietorial right to the product

The Anglican incumbent claims proprietorial right to the customers

*And the Free-Church ministers claim to cut out the middle-men
and deal direct with the Underwriter!*

Another ‘ouch!’

So is the deanery really some kind of Chamber of Trade? Or does it no longer have a place in the Church's new *market economy*?

3. The supermarket revolution

Significantly, many High Street Chambers of Trade are under threat from the large *supermarket* chains and the out-of-town shopping centres. Here is a relatively new and highly successful way of trading.

Supermarkets offer a wide choice, always checking out what their customers would prefer. They offer low prices, consistent quality, convenience and an attractive '*buying experience*'.

Supermarkets use their customer loyalty card schemes and market research so that they 'know' their customers. They understand the desires and preferences of their customers and visualise human beings almost entirely in these terms.

This new way of trading has been adopted very effectively by increasing numbers of supermarket-style congregations. They show little regard for the existing local churches or for denominational structures. And, yes, they are pulling in the *customers*, because they meet their desires.

In mission terms the strategy for a supermarket congregation is to persuade previously unknown individuals to come through the church door, in order first to experience something they enjoy and then be persuaded that there is something else on offer that they didn't know they wanted.

The worship in a supermarket church presents a consistent product in the context of an enjoyable and attractive '*buying experience*'. The demands made on people are clearly set out and are not too off-putting. People '*come back for more*' and, because they find it so congenial, many travel great distances each Sunday.

Could the supermarket be offering a genuine mission strategy, through which the Christian faith is to be embedded into today's consumer culture?

If so, we can learn many lessons from retailing. And maybe the story as we have told it so far is not such a caricature after all. Even if we have doubts about the supermarket model, it has much to teach us.

The recently introduced 'Churchcheck' scheme¹ tests the effectiveness of your local church when it is using the supermarket strategy. The scheme arranges for a 'mystery shopper' to visit your church and complete a survey. This records first impressions of the greeting received and the facilities on offer. A report is then given in confidence to your church leadership.

All this is good stuff - but pilot visits produced some intriguing results: Some of the non-churchgoing mystery visitors reported that they were most powerfully touched by something that wasn't on the survey form and that they couldn't name!

Perhaps some deeper thought is needed:

4. Testing the assumptions

The massive public shift into the consumer mindset has changed many of our day to day assumptions. But are the assumptions underlying the success of the supermarket church a true reflection of the Gospel?

Untested assumptions can affect what we decide and what we do in ways that may be completely inconsistent with what we say we believe. Here are just two examples:

¹ For further information about Churchcheck, visit www.christian-research.org.uk

a) What is 'the Gospel'?

The Good News of Jesus Christ is essentially about discovering new depths of personal relationships. It is a piece of *communication* that develops into *communion* with God in the context of a faithful *community*.² Unfortunately, within the consumer mindset, the Gospel can easily become a product, something we can possess as individuals, something that can be packaged and 'sold'.

In 1968 the newly-opened Yorkshire Television created 'Stars on Sunday.' It was a new breed of religious programming for the new commercial TV channel. It successfully drew a very large audience. Popular entertainers sang sentimental songs or read passages from the Bible - and, at the end of the show, a clergyman (sic!) was invited to provide a 'thought for the week.' At the time, the programme's producer, Jess Yates, set out its philosophy to a group of local clergy: "I'll provide the sugar; you provide the pill!"

b) Who am I? What gives me my self-worth?

Mainly as part of the shift towards a consumer culture, we have all been involved in a significant shift in our 'social perception' - how we measure our own value or self-worth in relation to others.

A generation or more ago, most people got their proper sense of pride from their craft, their profession or from what they contributed in other ways to the rest of society. When meeting a stranger, we would soon be asking, "What do you do for a living?" The underlying assumption was '*We are what we do.*'

² All three 'communi...' words are needed to translate what St Paul calls "the *koinonia* of the Holy Spirit" - the Holy Spirit's 'reconciling energy' (e.g. 2 Corinthians 13.13 and Philippians 2.1ff)

For many today, their pride comes from their designer labels. *'We are what we wear.'* Our acquisitions, our possessions and our appearance are the measure of our fulfilment in life. If we become miserable, we go shopping - *'retail therapy!'*

There may be evidence that the 'credit crunch' has begun to change this. As more people unfortunately lose their jobs, perhaps they are starting to value more the status the job gives them. During the period of serious unemployment in the 1980s, a major problem was the way many of those who had lost their jobs 'went into hiding' and couldn't be reached by the various agencies, including the Churches, who set out to help them.

The big lesson today is surely that the self-righteous drudgery of the Protestant work ethic and the self-gratification of greedy consumerism are both wrong. If relationships really are at the heart of the Good News of Jesus Christ, then the worth that we each have cannot be given *cash value*; it cannot be measured.

So how about *'we are the love we receive gratefully and give graciously'*?

5. Christian communities in the marketplace

a) Can the supermarket survive?

If the supermarket becomes generally accepted as the way forward for the Christian Church proclaiming the Gospel today, structures such as the deanery that assume the 'localness' of the local church are likely to be accorded little value. Already there are Church of England congregations achieving considerable numerical success who have little time for their deanery - and even less time for collaboration with Christians from other traditions. Already the argument is being presented that deaneries are redundant and should be abolished.

It may be, however, that the supermarket church is not a genuine inculturation of Christ's mission today, but represents a

dangerous capitulation to the spirit of the age. The Gospel surely cannot be shrink-wrapped as a package on a supermarket shelf; nor are human beings to be regarded solely or even primarily as 'consumers'.

However, the alternatives are more complex - as the leaders of many supermarket churches are well aware.

Already in the world of commerce the long-term viability of the supermarket is being challenged. People are asking questions about the distance food is transported. Supermarket dominance is being challenged (if not yet greatly threatened) by farmers' markets, organic crops and the desire to reclaim the local.

We may find out during the current recession whether these alternatives are a luxury for the well-heeled or whether they are pointers towards a new economic realism. It's a realism that arguably we urgently need - before our ever-growing human population destroys this fragile planet.

Similar questions now need to be asked about how best local communities of Christ's disciples can develop human beings in relation to God, in relation to each other and in relation to the rest of God's diverse world.

Is it now time for genuinely *local* churches to take up the challenge of rebuilding genuine human community?

b) Re-inventing the corner shop

Even within the discourse of the marketplace, Christian communities do not have to follow the model of the supermarket. A serious alternative has to be *the corner shop*.

Of course, hard-nosed business folk will argue that the corner shop, like the village Post Office, is no longer economic. It is cheaper and more efficient to give people what they want by getting them to travel to the supermarket. And most customers apparently prefer it.

The corner shop, however, worked on the basis of supplying people with everything they needed (but not always a lot of choice), when they needed it and where they needed it.

The buying experience in a corner shop is not measured by the quality of the decor, the price of the goods, or the choices on offer or even the smile on the face of those deputed to greet the stranger at the door.

The corner shop is effective when it delivers a personal service at the hub of a community, where customers are known and welcome as fellow-members of that community. It is essentially hospitable, making sure people's needs are met (rather than their desires and preferences) - because these are people who are already known, cared about and understood.³

If the regular worshippers in a local congregation could manage this level of interaction with the people round about, there would be no need for a secret visit by a 'mystery shopper'.

This means that what happens away from the church gate becomes the primary focus of attention. This is where the Gospel is communicated. If the inside of the church is used, it is for whatever the people outside need it for. Archbishop Rowan Williams has spoken vividly of the church in Manhattan that opened its doors to the fire-fighters after the destruction of the World Trade Centre. The pews are now scratched from the heavy equipment and stained by spilt tea - but who cares?

In this kind of church, worship is no less important, but it derives its energy from what the worshipping community has experienced during the rest of the week. They worship because of the evidence they have that God has been at work with them and through them, healing broken relationships, enabling diverse groups of people to appreciate what is healthy in each

³ The Autumn 2008 edition of 'Deanery Exchange' highlighted the distinction made between *greeting* and *welcome* by Bishop Alan Smith in his book 'God-shaped Mission' (Canterbury Press)

other and what is less than perfect in themselves, and offering people the free gift of hope.

Of course the reason why most corner shops fail is that there is no longer an integrated community in their neighbourhood that is willing to use them as the hub of community life. This is certainly the position of many Church of England parish churches in urban areas - and even in larger commuter villages.

Those who live in a consumer world are no longer in touch with their neighbours, no longer willing to share their lives with those around them. But as a supermarket-style economy collapses, perhaps we may soon need to rediscover how dependent we are on each other - including our pesky neighbours!

So can the underlying principles (if not the economics) of the corner shop be re-discovered - especially the main principle that it is there not primarily to sell things but to meet people's needs at the hub of a community of relationships?

What style of living can Christians demonstrate that will give others confidence to rebuild their lives on the basis of a genuine human community - and not just their own self-gratification?

6. The Deanery – a school for covenant living

The deanery is a relatively informal cluster of Christian communities serving their own particular localities and contexts. Each community has its own tradition, culture and sense of vocation in its context - its own story to tell.

Maybe the special value of the deanery at this time is that it provides an ideal environment where different communities within the same Christian family can practice a style of relationship that does not follow a commercial model.

“We are the love we receive gratefully and give graciously” - even when we are among those who do things very differently from ourselves. At Pentecost, the Holy Spirit didn’t arrange for everyone to speak the same language but for everyone to hear the Good News in their own language (Acts 2.6).

The deanery may be thought valueless when judged by the language of the marketplace, but as a school for covenant living it is priceless.

If the deanery becomes a place where groups of Christians from very different local congregations can seriously listen and converse with one another, several things become possible.

We can learn:

1. The *self-understanding* that enables us to see that what we need and what we want are not always the same.
2. The *skills* we need to help others work out what they need (as opposed to what they want)
3. The *discernment* that allows us to see that what others need may not be what we want to give.
4. The *humility* to recognise that we may need to receive something important from others (even though we may be critical of them and we may not be attracted by what God wants us to receive from them) before others will be able to receive what they need from us.
5. The *courage and selflessness* to accept that what we each need is determined not by our desires but by what equips us to serve a purpose beyond ourselves - God’s purpose, which is about reconciliation, healing, wholeness, and the unity of all things in heaven and earth with Christ as head (cf Ephesians 1, 9-10).

By developing these five characteristics, we'll be growing a style of Christian living together that reflects God's 'covenant love'. It's high time we explored again the meaning of a 'covenant' relationship as successive generations have come to understand it through the Bible and through subsequent Christian history.⁴

Christian discipleship is 'relational' - it deals with how we behave towards each other as individuals or as groups within wider communities.

By practising this relational discipleship - this gracious and grateful pattern of covenant living - within the family of the deanery, we'll learn disciplines that we can then share with other Christian communities within the wider Church of Jesus Christ *and more widely* - with other faith communities and with the rest of humankind.

By learning to share in this way, all sorts of possibilities will be opened up. Above all, we'll find a new energy - the 'reconciling energy' of the Holy Spirit - and a new sense of how together we can serve God's purpose both through our local churches and in the wider world.

Could it be that this capacity to share - to give and receive - is key to enabling others to know God's love for them and to build the better world of God's Kingdom?

⁴ See, for example, chapters 2 & 3 of 'In the Spirit of the Covenant' - the first interim report of the Joint Implementation Commission of the Anglican Methodist Covenant (Methodist Publishing House 2005)