

# THE EMERGING CHURCH

By ROSEMARY HAUGHTON

**T**HE CHURCH (in its broadest sense) is both included in, and emerging from, its culture.<sup>1</sup> It has to speak the 'language' (words, customs, lifestyles) of the culture, yet it must always challenge and seek to transform them in Christ. It is, therefore, called to be permanently in a state of revolution — that is, of repentance and conversion — leaving old ways as the Lord calls it forward. Therefore, in a time like the present, the Church is (like the culture) undergoing a breakthrough more complete than any previously experienced and in that it is called to a death and rebirth inevitably more far-reaching than any in its history. It is a real 'Exodus', as dangerous and as necessary as that model implies, but it is also one of a 'series' of such deaths and rebirths in the history of Judaism and of Christianity. As such, its most potent model is the first major discontinuity in the history of the christian Church when the young and, until that point, entirely jewish Church was challenged to become the Church of all nations. This is shown to us very vividly by Luke in his paradigm case of what happened to Cornelius and his household (Acts 10).

## *First conversion of the Church*

On a certain afternoon, not long after the birth of that turbulent and unpredictable entity called the Church, Simon Peter went up to the roof of the house of Joppa where he was lodging, because he wanted some peace and quiet for prayer. This is always a dangerous thing to do. The Lord is quick to take advantage of vulnerable moments of quiet and openness, in order to introduce very disquieting suggestions and requests into our lives. Peter found this to be so, for he was subjected to a thrice-repeated vision which flatly and crudely contradicted some of his most deeply held convictions about what constituted godly and acceptable behaviour. Although he did not know what was the purpose of all this, he knew he was being asked to overcome a moral revulsion so deep as to be part of himself. He must do the unthinkable; violate his strongest religious and ethnic taboos.

That was what it meant for Peter to accept the possibility that the

Spirit could work just as well among the uncircumcised heathen as among the chosen people. These 'unclean' people must be thought of as chosen also. The kind of conversion this required of him, indeed of the early Church as a whole, is important. It demanded the laying aside of a whole structure of corporate self respect; a radical confession of blindness and ignorance; a renunciation of pride and ability to control. It meant a surrender and a new going down into the dark waters of baptism. All this was necessary so that a new birth of the Church might be possible, a Church in which Jews and Gentiles might no longer be two classes of disciples but one and indistinguishable in the body of Christ. I stress the extreme radicality of the conversion required of Peter and of the young Church, because it is precisely this kind and degree of conversion which is required of the Church now. And although such a demand has repeatedly been laid on the Church in the course of its long history, whenever totally new human situations have been encountered, I think it is inescapable that the present demand is the clearest, and yet the hardest to discern and accept.

Peter was called to a group of people, headed by Cornelius, which was clearly under the guidance of the Spirit. It seems this group was already living a kind of community life, sharing in prayer and service and pondering together the insights they received as they studied Jewish scriptures. When Peter arrived, he found the entire group (referred to by Cornelius as 'we') assembled and evidently, as a group, eagerly prepared to listen to what Peter had to say. So when they heard the name which Peter announced to them, it came upon their ears with that sense of inner recognition which comes to those whose minds and hearts are open and prepared. And 'the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word'. This happened to the assembly before they received baptism. Uncircumcised, unbaptized, alien in life-style and culture, these people received the Spirit.

Peter stayed for some days. For him and those with him, the decision to accept the invitation was in itself an act of converted humility which must have been very unsettling and strange to these Jews. Having accepted, they were newly open to God and to these new companions in the Lord. As much as Cornelius and his household recognized in Peter's message the fulfilment of all they had learned and prayed, so Peter and those with him learned to recognize a message to themselves which turned their previous assumptions about the nature of the Church upside down. They were prepared to accept the implications of this — those they could

perceive and those they could not yet perceive. A radical conversion of the existing Church was required, and the same is required of us now.

*If it be cut down, it will sprout again*

To recognize this movement of the Spirit, who is behaving in exactly the same way as he did in the household of Cornelius, we have to hold two things in tension: the actual people and events which we can observe, and the theological description of them, by which we are able to recognize the real nature of what they are, and are doing. In a sense, it would seem logical to start with the theological description, but it is more illuminating to begin where experience begins, with random and apparently unrelated phenomena, long before it becomes possible to realize that questions are arising from similarities and relationships between them.

Many people have found themselves attracted to, or at least aware of a variety of small groups gathered for many different reasons and purposes both secular and religious. A desire to right a wrong, or promote a better way of living, or reach a different understanding of life, or just a sense of 'needing something more' in life than they were offered by the conventional expectations — these and other reasons draw people to seek help from each other in their search.

In families and groups of families; in small temporary groups of college students sharing life and prayer and service; in groups gathered for some kind of social action; in groups gathered for prayer; in residential communities and in looser 'neighbourhood' ones; groups of factory workers or farmers; groups of religious people searching for new ways; groups of married and celibate together; in apartments, in church halls or somebody's living room; on college campus or within the forbidding walls of 'Motherhouses'; in all these ways and places people are coming together, trying to find a way to make sense of their lives, to 'be' the future by letting it grow out of the depths of themselves. The age range is as large as human life; the variety of education, race, religion (or lack of it) and income is equally so. Many are Christians or Jews. Many are spiritual seekers but have no explicit faith, and many are a mixture of these.

They have two things in common, one negative and the other positive. The negative, which is felt but may not always be articulated, is that all these groups are reacting against the cult of bigness. They are aware, at some level, that scale is a matter of

crucial importance to human life, whether in buildings or organization; that at a certain point, bigness leads to loss of real contact, and facilitates manipulation rather than co-operation in human life. They are aware of an obscure sense of fear. They know that much of the democratic process is window-dressing; the real decisions are made outside it. They know that their needs and desires are manipulated by advertisers, and that many of their 'own' reactions are conditioned by questions that may not be asked, assumptions which may not be questioned. They have recognized, at least implicitly, that they are up against something basically and finally corrupt and corrupting, so something very deep and essential in them revolts, and in their need to articulate and 'live' this revolt, they turn to others and discover a shared response and need.

*Small is beautiful*

The positive aspect is not only the other side of this — it goes much further. There is an awareness of the positive value of being in a group small enough for people to relate to each other very directly. *How* small the group has to be depends on the kind of association they have and the degree of interaction needed to accomplish their purpose. A neighbourhood 'housing' group may be quite large. Their community lies in the deep and real encounter which takes place at the level of common endeavour, sacrifice and achievement. A prayer or study group meeting in someone's room has, on the other hand, to be small enough for the development of an increasing degree of mutual openness and a sharing of personal hopes and fears. In families, or communities of several families, there is yet a different kind of relatedness — a natural family one rediscovered *in* community, *for* service to others. Its size can be quite small, as in one 'normal' family, or quite large, as in some rural communities of twenty or more families. Small or large are relative terms. All such groups are small in relation to the size of the dominant 'social units'. Their positive quality derives partly from the fact of this smallness, which gives each person a sense of being significant and purposeful. This confidence is a direct result of the kind of sharing which is only possible when people are able to encounter each other as mutually responsible, and to lower their defences sufficiently to be deeply available to each other.

The community may come together only for a short time, for a specific purpose or it may be permanent, taking on a long-term service of some kind (farming, education, etc.). Or it may be a

'developing' situation, such as those in which families are involved, in which children and their changing needs make a constant re-assessment of possibilities and priorities a part of the life and meaning of the community. But whatever form it takes, it is not static. The failure-rate is high, because many people are not prepared to go through the successive stages of deepening interaction which growth in community requires. But this fact in itself shows us the need to be accurately aware of the dynamics of community growth, which requires articulation as spiritual, and if spiritual, then (if they are not to be purely subjective and relative) theological.

The theological description of these little, varied, and struggling communities is that they are the early stages of the happening called 'Church'. At a certain point, a group of people gathered together to search — for truth, meaning, justice, experience of God — begins to diversify its common life. Whether it begins with a common act of service, with study, or with prayer, it discovers a need for a measure of all three in order to go on being. A community incapable of such development may break up at this point, but a community which works, studies, prays together in order to serve some ultimate good — which is God, whatever image they happen to be using — is a Church in embryo, though it can only truly be called 'Church' when it has reached the point of being able to articulate its own meaning as in some way Christ-centred. This relation, when it is discovered, may perhaps be inadequately expressed, but it is enough to be identifiable as the point at which we can say 'this is the Church happening'. It is important to recognize that to call a group at this point a 'Church' does not mean it is 'holier' or more clearly Spirit-led than some other. It is a reference to its language of self-recognition as centred on Christ.

The change in the community gathered in the house of Cornelius had precisely this character. It had already been living its common life in prayer, study, and action ('almsgiving') and it was reaching, or more probably had already reached, the stage of explicitly recognizing that this man Jesus, about whom they were hearing reports and picking up clues, was the point towards which all their prayer and study and action had been moving. Peter's job was to affirm the truth of what they had perceived, and to articulate it for them in an explicit way. This showed them clearly what it was in which they were involved, and what that involvement required of them. This is exactly what we see happening now, in thousands of groups all over the world.

*Three stages of church growth*

If people do respond, there are visibly three stages of 'ecclesial evolution' in such groups, which can be called, for convenience, the 'pre-Church'; the 'emerging Church'; and the 'Church in mission'. Naturally these stages overlap, and the last two may never happen. The 'pre-Church' is the stage at which, as we have seen, a group of people gather together for any number of reasons and, as they interact over a period of time, discover a sense of group identity as people involved in some kind of quest, however vaguely articulated. If the group is to become a 'pre-Church' it will soon diversify the things it does together to include the areas of prayer, study and action. The idea of prayer may not be explicit, but there must be a desire to reflect deeply, both personally and in common, on the underlying values which have drawn the group together and have been in practice articulated at first by one particular common cause or interest. This deliberate deepening of understanding, the facing of underlying desires and motives, is the *anamnesis* or recovery of meaning in its own history as the story of God's calling, and it is necessary if the group is to discover the unity, trust, and sense of longing and hope which will enable it, when the time comes, to become a Church and to develop as one. At the point where that fails, the reality of the group as Church will also begin to fail.

'Study' in this context means rational reflection on the nature and work of the group, with a view to understanding it more deeply — not only as it is experienced in this interaction of the people concerned, but in its larger social, political and religious context. 'Study' may include group discussion, background reading and comment on it, taking appropriate courses, getting outside advice and comment, but also it means constant and careful observation of the group's being 'history', to show where it seems to be going, its mistakes and its breakthroughs and their 'whys' and 'hows'. Such study is closely linked to prayer but it is distinctly intellectual, however informal it is.

'Action' means things the group does as a result of its discovery of identity as a group. Some things may be done only by a few people, even by only one, but they are done in the name of the group and motivated by discoveries made and directions taken by the whole group. 'Action' undertaken may vary from organizing a protest to doing yoga, but whatever it is, it must grow out of prayer and study and in turn will contribute to study and deepen prayer.

The three things must all be present in some degree, and all are

interrelated and cannot survive without each other. Without any one of the three the group will not be a 'pre-Church' and will not be capable of becoming a Church. A 'pre-Church' becomes a 'Church' at the moment at which it becomes consciously aware that its identity as a group finds its name, centre and meaning in Christ. This can happen quite suddenly, as it did in the household of Cornelius, or over a long period, as christian words and ideas, vaguely and perhaps uncomfortably heard and used, gradually acquire meaning through their relation to activities and common experiences until people begin to say 'Jesus' and mean not just somebody in a story, or an idea, but an effective presence and fact. The theological articulation of the awareness of Jesus as the 'being' of the group may be rudimentary or naïve or even falsely stated, but although this may lead to mistakes and disaster later, such inadequacies do not alter the fact that this is the event which creates a Church.

#### *Masculine and feminine*

The explanation of how the Church is emerging now requires some understanding of the reality of the 'feminine' in Christianity — the sense of 'feminine', that is, which finds an important expression in the theology of divine wisdom in the Old Testament. Sadly, in such a brief article, there is no room to develop this satisfactorily here beyond establishing some basic starting points. Wisdom in the Old Testament is feminine. She is not merely grammatically feminine but the thinking about her is developed in terms of a recognizable feminine type of being and activity, and this being and activity are divine. We are not talking about masculine or feminine qualities *in God* (which is theological nonsense) but about the ways in which people *experience* God in their lives and in all creation. Without entering into arguments about innate or conditioned differences between the sexes, we can say that both sexes have a 'masculine' and a 'feminine' aspect to their being as human, and that the 'feminine' tends to predominate in women and the 'masculine' in men. Taking the matter at that simple and unargumentative level it is possible to discern two types of approaches to life and action which can be called feminine and masculine.

The masculine approach is essentially 'external'. In its activities it looks at situations, examines the evidence, makes judgments and decisions, and then carries them out, applying the understanding gained *to* the situation from 'outside'. This approach has

characterized not only government, business and most scientific study but also the Church. The feminine approach comes from the opposite direction in a sense. Instead of looking at situations from 'outside', evaluating and reasoning to conclusions, it feels its way into a situation from 'within', becoming aware of different aspects of it, absorbing a sense of the total 'being' of the thing through both detailed experience and sensitivity to the general atmosphere.

In scripture we can see this approach articulated as the way of Wisdom herself. The Wisdom passages present us with an image of the relation of God to creation which is complementary to that of the beginning of Genesis. The approach of God as Wisdom is feminine.<sup>2</sup> This is the 'feminine' godhead in the sense described — reaching out from *within* the situation, clearing and changing it, wielding immense power, somehow 'invisible' within creation yet not 'dissolved' in it. These and other Wisdom images are used by St Paul (cf Col 1,15) and John (cf Jn 1,2-3), to define the essential being of Jesus. This was far from arbitrary. Not only the fact of Incarnation but the character of Jesus show Wisdom at work.

Until recently an indomitably 'masculine' Church set about responding to such changes as it saw and could measure and it both succeeded and failed. The new identity, we may say, is that of Wisdom. So, gently and powerfully 'reaching from one end of creation to the other', the Wisdom of God takes root and begins to appear above the ground cleared by the huge effort of many Christians to 'renew' institutionally. Like plants in spring, the new growth pushes up, appearing in cracks in the great marble pavements of Church and state, forcing the slabs apart, loosening the structures. They look so weak, those little, unofficial, experimental, humanly vulnerable communities, but they can move mountains because they are alive with the life of the Spirit of God who is Wisdom.

We are, then, at a point of history where something of quite basic, indeed of eternal importance is happening in the life of the Church, and this something is intrinsically linked to the theology of Wisdom which supplies us with the conceptual tools we need in order to recognize the nature of this happening. The Church is that point of the human situation at which this consciousness surfaces, that it may be able to respond consciously to God's call to serve the world in its concrete and particular needs. The Church has a vocation to serve, to preach the Good News to the poor, to heal and liberate. But 'vocation' is something which has to be recognized or it remains

merely an uncomfortable feeling. This recognition happens in the community as people help each other to discover who they are and what is demanded of them as the Church.

What is needed is the sense of the Church as necessarily *in mission*. In the small emerging Churches this becomes the key to everything else. Once a 'pre-Church' has become Church, it has to try to discover more and more what its being as Body of Christ means and demands. It has to reflect on its past in order to perceive God's work and take that work into a christian future. It must find ways to articulate its newly discovered being which are appropriate to its own particular experience and needs and fittingly express its real nature. It will shed many old patterns; it will discover new ones; it will make mistakes; it will experiment. It will probably go through periods of enthusiasm followed by despondence and discouragement, but gradually a pattern should emerge which is distinctly its own, but which clearly roots it in christian tradition and links it to other Churches which together form the greater Church.

#### *Marks of a genuine Church*

The test is whether a group is visibly and openly living 'like Jesus'. This does not mean 'is it perfect?' It will be obviously limited, sinful, ignorant, as were the first Churches. It means that there must be present clear, even if uneven, signs of the Spirit of Jesus, as Paul described them: love, joy, peace, patience — the 'fruits of the Spirit'. But we can recognize this more surely simply by trying to see whether behaviour in such a gathering is like the behaviour of Jesus as we know him in the gospels. If such signs are present, we can say with some assurance: 'It is the Lord'. Where we find these, we see the Church alive and growing; where they are absent, this is not the christian Church. This is the stark theological truth. We are not talking about the behaviour of individuals but of the habitual attitudes and standards of identifiable groups of people, and once we take this seriously, we realize once more how accurately truthful and practical are the words of New Testament writings as they transmit to us the message of Jesus.

By drawing on actual experience of the kind of groups as those I have described earlier, it is possible to produce an imaginative construct of what the new Church could look like to the non-christian outsider. The most obvious thing would probably be the practical services rendered by the Church, similar to those apparently characteristic of the earliest Churches, as we can see in

the story of Dorcas (Acts 9,36). Such services would be on a small and individual scale involving all members of the Church (including those, such as the elderly but still active, normally regarded as in need of help themselves). Households would routinely take in people in various kinds of need according to their abilities and space available. Church members would also be found to be involved in many local and national concerns in the areas of social justice and peace. Another characteristic activity of the Church would be connected with telling inquirers about the life and meaning of the Church, often informally but sometimes in the form of sustained preparation for actual membership such as Paul's friends Priscilla and Aquila gave for converts. At the very heart of all the outward activity would be regular and frequent meetings of this strange group of people in one house, or in different houses in turn to worship Jesus as Lord in the breaking of bread, to reflect on his word, and to support one another in discipleship. The group would not be exclusive. Not only would it probably include people of different denominational origins, but it could attract other people who were not yet ready to make a commitment to the Church. The Church would be a point of attraction, hope and support even for people who had no faith. Such a Church is a 'light on a lampstand', a 'city set on a hill', a visible sign of the Kingdom of God already at work in the human situation.

We need also, however, to discern the marks of such a Church from a specifically christian point of view based on the categories of the New Testament and the long experience of christian history and theology. First of all, such a Church must be *visible*. It must have an observable membership, characteristic ritual and activities, a common language to express its sense of its own meaning. Small Churches vary a great deal in character and custom but the way they centre all the variety of their experience in Christ gives to their varied kinds of visibility an equally visible unity.

Such a Church must be characterized by *hospitality*. Being normally household-centred, it demands of the households in which its meeting takes place, and of others associated with it, an openness and generosity in terms of space and time as well as possessions which alone make possible the service of the needy which Jesus demanded of his disciples. Necessarily, therefore, such a Church is 'poor'.

The third characteristic is that of *inclusiveness*. These little Churches cross boundaries of denomination, income, education, age and even those between faiths and between belief and unbelief.

People are included because they are wanting God, in whatever way or degree. Not all reach a point of explicit commitment, yet they gather into a visible openness, which does not blur differences; it grows out of them into Christ. Finally, and growing out of the others, there is something which I can only call 'attractiveness'; people are drawn to such a Church, sensing the presence of life, truth, peace, purpose.

It will be obvious that another way of identifying the four marks of a genuine Church which I have described is to say that it is one, holy, catholic and apostolic. I repeat that this description is a synthesis. Not many of the christian communities so far emerging display all of these signs in such a developed degree. Though some do, and more will do so, the chief reason for this is simply that, to develop fully, the group has to be aware of itself *as a Church*, and to be willing to recognize and respond to the demands implicit in that.

It is very important, however, to realize that the emergence of these Churches cannot be planned. It has recently become clear that many people who have observed what is occurring and have become very enthusiastic about it (including some bishops) have set out to reproduce the small Churches they saw growing simply by dividing up parishes into convenient neighbourhood units and gathering the people there into 'communities' for worship. In most cases these groups never became Churches and as soon as the clerical leadership ceased to hold them together they disintegrated. There is much, however, which can be done. How such a Church can be helped to come into existence needs more detailed examination than is possible in this brief article, as do the questions of alternative formation and commissioning for ministry.

### *Recognizing the risen Christ*

A new Church especially needs a willingness to accept misunderstanding without either defiance or timidity. Misunderstanding and opposition are bound to come. Jesus repeatedly warned that they would; they are even in some sense proof of the authenticity of what is emerging. They have to be dealt with in prayer and recognized as a constant feature of genuine christian experience. This includes the most painful kind of all, which is opposition from relations, friends, and fellow Christians whom one respects and loves. Linked to this is a new and important kind of discernment which has to be done by people involved in the new Churches, especially the just emerging ones. This concerns relationships between the 'old' and 'new'

Churches. But to use these terms may be deceptive — they are not mutually exclusive.

When new Churches are being helped towards recognition of Christ as their centre and meaning, they become aware of contrast not only with their own previous condition but with other kinds of situation labelled 'Church' in which they may have been themselves involved. The contrast they begin to recognize between their own developing attitudes and those of people with whom they live and perhaps worship is often the catalyst which makes them conscious of who they are. In a religious community in which some are coming to awareness of the Lord's call to them to respond as a Church, for instance, these people will more and more become aware not only that they themselves are becoming different but that the surrounding community, which does not share this awareness, is a reality they need to respond to in some way — and *how* is the agonizing question. This is such a basic dilemma for emerging Churches in this 'post-Christian' world that one of the chief tasks of the Church for some time to come must be to discern the right decisions and responses in this area.

The 'model' for this is the recognition of the risen Christ. What the new Churches and those called to help them have to do, is to *discern* the presence of the living Lord. In considering ways in which new Churches can cope with this acute human problem we can provide no solutions but at least a few guide-lines as bases for discernment and action may be helpful. First of all it is important to recognize that a genuine Spirit-filled new 'Church' can and does emerge from traditional structures as well as in marginal situations. This happens when, for instance, a good parish naturally 'overflows' into new Churches which break through parish structures but remain vitally linked to each other through their common 'parent'. Then there are some simple and sensible matters of behaviour and attitude. Members of new Churches who come from a denominational tradition often and properly attend worship in their local church as well as the meetings of their 'household Church'. They should be prepared to accept legitimate directives from those in authority in Church structures of their own tradition even if this is painful. However, legitimate authority can be exercised in illegitimate ways. Careful discernment is necessary, but the principle is clear in the gospels and in traditional catholic moral theology that on occasions a Christian has the duty to refuse to conform. It is important that people should not provoke opposition unnecessarily or confuse

provocation with genuine prophetic challenge. As befits Christians, members of new Churches should be careful to attribute the best possible motives.

As a background to all this the new Churches should maintain by prayer and study a clarity and confidence in God's guidance, so that in the long run the relationship between old and new may be such as to allow the emergence of forms of church life in which it will be possible for older patterns of ministry to find a new incarnation, discovering a deep continuity through a willingness to trust the Spirit to guide the Church through the necessary and always painful discontinuity.

A demand for repentance and baptism is being made of the existing and explicit and 'official' Church. This means not only the process of individual conversion but also the conversion of the Church itself, of dying and rising with Christ to become his presence in those particular and concrete situations where the messengers of the Spirit in new places call to the already visible Church to come and help them. If the Church is accurately described as 'the Body of Christ' that means that it is identical in its inmost being with the one who is incarnate God. Only in so far as it has undergone death with Christ will it be able effectively to be the presence of the risen Jesus in any place where a nascent Church is struggling towards its full identity in Christ.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> This article is an adaptation of part of a much longer unpublished study-paper, intended to stimulate prayer, discussion and action; new experience and insight will grow from these. Copies of the full paper may be obtained from the editors on request. We are grateful to the author for her permission to edit this paper.

<sup>2</sup> Cf e.g. Prov 8,22-31; Wis 7,22-8,1.