

COMMUNITY TRANSFORMATION Mobilising the Grass Roots – Paper One

Eighteenth Century

Any strategy of community transformation has to take account of the structure and function of society. There is much that we can learn from the strategy followed by the Clapham Sect in Georgian England. But society today is far more complex than it was in the 18th century when, despite the Industrial Revolution having plunged the nation into a period of rapid social change, the institutional structure of society was still essentially feudal in nature and the economy was still largely rural agrarian.

The Clapham Sect themselves were a group drawn from widely different professions, the church, banking, commerce, trade, law, politics and the media (such as it was in those days). They each used their experience, skills, gifts and resources to pursue a common objective – that of alleviating the suffering of the poor, raising the moral standards and behavioural norms of the nation, and communicating biblical knowledge and biblical principles to the general population both at home and in the Empire. It was in pursuit of this latter objective that they founded societies such as the Bible Society, the Church Missionary Society and lesser-known institutions such as the Society for the Improvement of Manners.

Twenty First Century

In the highly complex social structure of postmodern 21st century Britain any successful movement for community transformation has to be carried out from *within* the constituent parts of the institutional structures of the nation. It cannot be imposed from the outside. Each institution has to have its own strategy of transformation and it is those who are actively involved in the functioning of each institution who are best placed to identify and initiate policies of creative change.

It is those who are active within the Health Service who are best placed to see the strengths and weaknesses of the present policy, to understand the way in which the institution functions and actively to work for creative change. It is those who are teaching or active educationalists who are best placed to understand how the whole process of the formal socialisation of children is functioning. They know the kind of changes needed in education to enable children, not simply to acquire knowledge, but also to develop mature and responsible characters and to receive a value system that has an objective base in reality rather than the kind of libertarian situation ethics that children acquire from the popular media, from pop idols and even from their own experience of fragmented family life.

Christian Associations

In order to achieve a nationwide movement for community transformation that is institutionally based, key functionaries within each institution have to be mobilised, have a shared vision of the overall objective and work together with other committed Christians within that institution for the formation of a creative strategy of social change. To further this objective the Christian Associations within different professions, and within the different divisions of the economy such as banking, commerce, trade and industry, need to be active both in embracing a vision of creative change and in contacting other committed Christians within their profession or part of

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the economy. There is a very large number of such Associations such as the Association of Christian Lawyers, Association of Christian Teachers, etc... and many more. This reflects the widespread distribution of Christians in the workplace. In addition there are many prayer groups and lunchtime or breakfast meetings in all sections of the economy. A national movement of community transformation would mobilise this strength and direct it into a strategy of creative change.

Each institution needs to have its own 'think tank' seeking to discover that kind of God-directed strategy that will inject biblical principles into the workplace and into relationships between individuals within that institution that will have a transforming effect upon its performance, prosperity and achievement of objectives. Where appropriate such a strategy of creative change should have a nationwide vision and national coordination but in larger institutions such as the Health Service and Education there needs to be, not only regional consultations and strategies, but also much more localised activities such as within each hospital or each school or group of schools within a particular educational authority, town or city.

Changing the Church

This kind of strategy of social change requires a change of mindset within the church. The 20th century church inherited the legacy of ascribed social status from the 19th century Victorian era, which in turn was an inheritance from feudal England where the incumbent was often one of the minor sons from an aristocratic family who enjoyed a living that gave him a standard of life far above that of most of his parishioners. Among the free churches, dissenting ministers, although despised by the aristocracy and rejected by Church of England clergy, were nevertheless held in high esteem by the ordinary populace. Thus churches of all mainline denominations throughout the first half of the 20th century enjoyed high social standing. The decline of the institutional church in the second half of the 20th century in terms of Sunday attendance, finances and in the perceived moral standards of its leadership, both professional and lay, resulted in a steep decline in the social status of the Church and of the ministry as a profession or calling. This decline in social esteem has severely adversely affected the mission of the Church and has greatly increased the credibility gap between those who have embraced the Christian faith and the unreached.

The institutional church (this includes churches of all types, both historic denominations and new churches) is no longer in a position to exercise significant influence in the life of the nation, as it did, for example, in Victorian Britain when it was popularly said that things proclaimed from the pulpit in Carr's Lane Birmingham by Dr R W Dale on Sunday mornings would be repeated in the House of Commons by Gladstone on Monday. The church therefore has to find new ways of communicating the gospel into the postmodern generation. For this it requires not merely a new strategy but a change of mindset.

While it is right that those who are called into the ministry of the word and sacrament should be honoured by the people of God, their calling to ministry should not be regarded as a higher calling than those who are called to work in secular institutions. The latter have the task of witnessing to unbelievers with whom they work on a daily basis and applying the principles of the gospel in the workplace. In many ways this is a significantly more difficult calling than those who primarily function within the protective environment of living and working among the saints.

A good example of the way the present mindset within the church works, is to be seen when a couple feel a call to the overseas mission field. On their last Sunday before flying to their destination they are given a valedictory service, they will be prayed over, commissioned for their task, and commended to God. The congregation will commit themselves to regular prayer and support for the couple and their mission. They are said to be in 'full-time ministry' and are therefore honoured and upheld in the church.

Honouring the Laity

By contrast, the businessman who regularly sits in the pew on Sundays and sets off to the city on Monday mornings is never prayed for or recognised as an ambassador for Christ, a living witness for the gospel in a hostile secular environment. He has no special status within the church. He is expected to support the church, to give generously from his income, to be actively

involved in the work of the church in his leisure time, often at the expense of family time, but he or she is not regarded as having a ministry calling or as one who exercises ministry gifts except on a part-time basis within the church. He is not regarded as a full-time evangelist whose calling is to function within a secular institution. He or she are never even asked if they have any special needs for prayer or if there are any ways in which the church can get behind them to support them in their work. In short, work in the secular world is not regarded as ministry.

The businessman, the workman or the professional is not regarded as an evangelist. This lack of recognition is one of the greatest discouragements for the exercise of the gift of evangelism. When we are not recognised we feel despised and unwanted, our gifts are not valued and therefore our own self-esteem is diminished. In Britain, with five million regular churchgoers and 72% of the population claiming to be Christian, there is a huge potential for changing the nation. If we recover the New Testament concept of a believer being a witness for the Lord Jesus, there is a vast army of Christians to share their faith.

This is where a change of mindset within the church is needed if we are to see a vibrant grass-roots movement of social transformation take place in Britain in the next generation. This is not a short-term quick-fix strategy, but a long-term process of community transformation that will arise from the grass-roots and spread throughout the land. It begins with the church itself setting our own house in order. The change of mindset required will not diminish the role of the minister or of those called into leadership either in the local church, or in regional, or national ministry. Indeed it affirms their calling and places it in a true biblical, New Testament perspective.

The Serving Church

The true church of God is a servant. The serving church will win the respect even of a cynical postmodern generation because it is a generation that is grossly insecure and suffering from the effects of the breakdown of family life and especially the loss of the stability that should be engendered into society through the extended family. Grandparents in our postmodern era have no status in law and yet in a generation of children with an 'orphan spirit', deprived of the love and stability of a two-parent home, grandparents are often the one stabilising influence in a child's life. There have, however, been many instances of grandparents being denied access to children following an acrimonious divorce of the parents. In these situations the suffering of children is exacerbated. Today we have a generation of children and young people who are longing for love and security, for a clear sense of identity and purpose in life. But it is a generation that has no knowledge of the Bible or of absolute values.

The church is called in the postmodern 21st century to function in a virgin mission field. In order to do this it is a prime necessity to reassess its mission, to rediscover its *raison d'être*. The church has to reassess its objectives and the way in which those objectives can be achieved. Such a re-ordering of the mission of the church has to grow out of the worship and prayer-life of the church. It has to be a church that is committed to listening for the voice of the Lord and seeking the face of God for the right direction, so that we are saved from uselessly pursuing 'good ideas', the product of human wisdom and are able to become a Holy Spirit-filled body of believers carrying out the mission of the living God.