

## **Paper 2 from the October 2023 Trustees meeting**

### **More Discussion Topics on the Possible Future 'Preserving the Ministry Heritage'**

#### **DIFFERING RESPONSES TO SOCIAL CHANGE - ROCKING OR STEADYING**

It may seem strange that for the October trustees meeting when we were discussing the future, Monica had written a paper on 'rocking the boat' and Cliff had written one on 'steadying the ship'. These have both been important in our ministry and are complementary parts of our heritage principles.

In our first two churches in London, Harlesden, and High Cross Tottenham, we gained a reputation for 'steadying the ship'. The 1950s and 60s was a time when the UK was regarded as a Christian country, the church was highly respected, and still at the centre of most communities. Teaching of Scripture in schools was compulsory (RK became RI and then RE), but it was also a time of rapid social transformation – all our social institutions were changing, beginning in the economy.

It was a time of full employment, low unemployment, with a demand for labour. Suddenly young people for the first time in history were earning high wages and became a new consumer group with high wages and low social responsibilities. This produced a fundamental social change from age to youth.

The late 1950s were hit by rock 'n' roll, Mods and Teddy boys, rapidly followed by the 1960s and the Flower People, the peace protesters, the sexual revolution, 'Make Love – Not War', the CND (Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament). Immigration began in this period which reversed the process of colonisation that had lasted for 400 years whereby the British went out to the colonies – now the colonies were coming into Britain! It was a new phenomenon and highly disturbing because although employment was high, and they were coming in to fill the lower paid jobs, housing was in short supply, causing local social tensions.

Everything was changing, all our social institutions were being shaken. In 1950 three quarters of the nation's children went to Sunday school – but by 1980 all the afternoon Sunday schools had closed. Church attendance, had been decreasing slowly since 1960, but although we tried to alleviate this church decline began escalating throughout the land bringing about change – Britain was fundamentally changing.

Our church at High Cross Tottenham throughout the 50s and 60s was still growing which was against the trend. Churches in inner-city areas were closing at a rapid rate, but we were enjoying considerable success and public attention with regular broadcasts and reports in the media – what Cliff said in a Sunday sermon was often reported in the national newspapers and even quoted in Parliament.

We were watching the social changes. Sociology was the most popular subject in the academic world and we used theoretical concepts to understand what was happening nationally and within the church. We had great concern to see churches closing in inner-city areas where they would never regain the land for the gospel. We wanted to develop new concepts in evangelism BUT our church was too strong and steeped in tradition for us to be able to do this without creating tension there.

We had a number of invitations to move from Tottenham to prestigious churches with national reputations, but this was not what we wanted. We moved into the East End of London, taking a pastorate with only about 30 church members who could not support us financially – leaving behind a congregation of 1,000. Our friends thought we were mad! But like Abraham going out from a safe and secure base and not knowing where he was going – we moved into the East End with a simple trust in God – our prayer was an echo of the prayer of Moses, *“If your presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here”* (Exodus 33:15). We were responding to the need for a new strategy of ministry which we saw as an urgent need.

Change was continuing in other ways in our nation – even to the closure and selling off of many of our school playing fields for housing, with the move from team sports to individual performance (the start of a new ‘me’ social revolution) and in social work away from buildings - the unattached social worker or youth worker was in great demand.

Our tiny church base in East Ham was all we needed, to draw together frustrated church leaders in the area for a combined outreach to the whole region. In the first year we founded the Newham Community Renewal Programme (NCRP) using a combination of sociological theory, theological insights, church growth principles and community development concepts, together with biblical values – especially those drawn from our study of the early church and the ‘community of believers’ that we believed to be of fundamental significance in the work we were seeking to develop.

The NCRP rapidly flourished and within three years we had a team of 20 young people plus at least 50 volunteers and 40 churches collaborating in a new movement of community-based outreach of the gospel. We called it “community-based evangelism”. Our fundamental values were: starting where people were, valuing every individual, seeing the potential rather than the present reality and many more. Cliff was the figurehead and Monica was fully involved in communicating these new concepts by teaching our young team, while still teaching at a progressive secondary school in an adjoining borough (and practising change there too!). Then we were offered a redundant church building which nobody wanted to touch, so she took responsibility for that as well. The work as a whole, but perhaps especially the redundant church venture, opened up the national scene which laid the foundation for all we have done since then, including the British Church Growth Association which Monica then led for 25 years.

This is why we see our heritage as being both ‘rocking the boat’ and ‘steadying the ship’ – disturbing complacency and blockages to progress on the one hand while preserving fine tradition and fundamental values – our ministry heritage is a both/and, and not either/or. Our work has always been community-oriented, valuing each individual. From the earliest part of our ministry, we made a special study of the Early Church, people are still the greatest resource the church and nation has.

The apostle Paul said, *“I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some.”* (1 Corinthians 9:22),