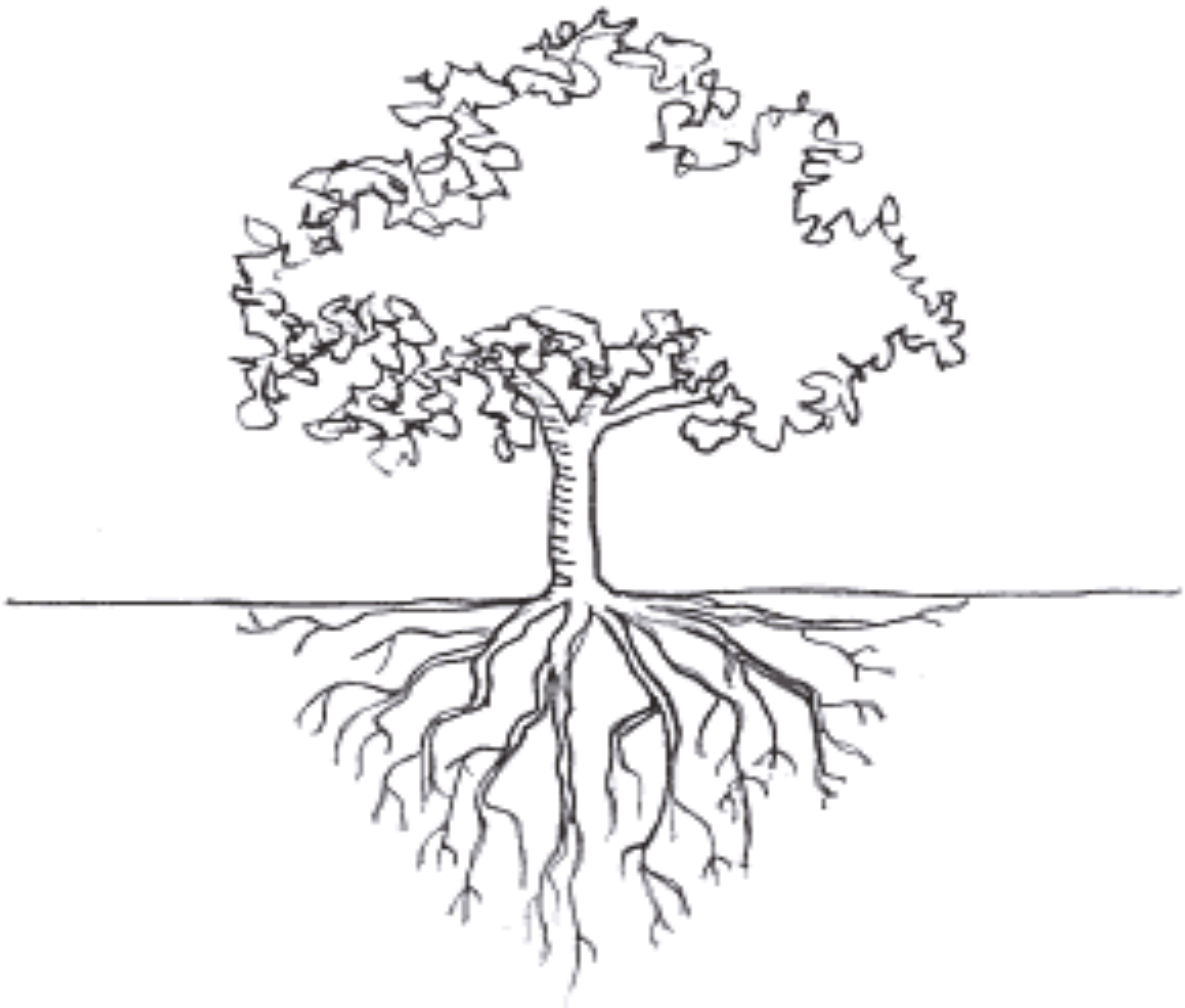
Meristems

(micro church for 21st C!)



The Rationale

Nigel Barge

Meristems The Rationale

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Summary

Jesus gave His disciples two new, foundational commands:

1) 'Love one another' (John 13:34)
2) '… disciple all nations'. (Matthew 28:19)

How are we to obey these within today's society?
The interface between the church, and the society it seeks to reach, must be smooth.

To bring the Gospel of Jesus to 21st Century Scottish society, the situation ideally will be:

1) Small – 2 to 4 people
2) Safe – controlled by someone you trust
3) Finite – operating in sections of about 7 weeks
4) Accessible – at a time and a place that 'fits in'
5) Biblical – looking at the Word of God
6) Low key – the Word is The Teacher

A 'meristem' * seeks to provide a vehicle that takes into account these needs. It is designed to let church members explore the truth of the Gospel AND to share it with those who are outside the church, in a way that those interested might find *socially non-threatening.*

If the Lord is at work, the hope is that believers would grow in grace and truth, and seekers would meet the Lord Jesus as He is revealed in His Word. As more people believe in Jesus, the 'meristem' grows, and so it must –

D I V - I D E !

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* **meristem** |ˈmerəˌstem noun, Botany: a region of plant tissue, found chiefly at the growing tips of roots and shoots and in the cambium, consisting of ***actively dividing cells forming new tissue.***

ORIGIN late 19th cent.: formed irregularly from Greek *meristos 'divisible,'* from *merizein 'divide into parts,'* from *meros 'part'.*

Introduction

Jesus promised His disciples that he would make them ‘fishers of men’ (Mark 1:27). Why is it, then, that today the church in the west is generally in such dire straits? Why is it that there are so few people becoming Christians?

Some might say that the ‘Word of God is rare’, as it was in the time of the prophet Eli (1 Samuel 3:1) and that the lack of conversions is purely down to the fact that God is not at work. Others, however, while acknowledging the sovereignty of God in all things, might also admit a limitation in others becoming Christians may be their own lack of faith and action.

Those who are open to this possibility may be able to recognise – and admit – their guilt in two ways:

1) We are fishing in the wrong place

Changes in the flow of rivers in the Aral sea in Kazakhstan over the last 70 years have dried up a very large part of it. There are boats ‘high and dry’ - *miles* from any water and fish.



Former Aral Sea port of Dzhambul in Kazakhstan, the sea has massively shrunk due to overuse of water resources started by the Soviets

Any amount of equipment or review of technique will be fruitless – there are no fish to be caught because *there is no water!*

In times past, we used to ‘fish’ in the church. It was a significant meeting place for all, at the centre of society. However, over the last generation or two, ‘the waters have receded’. Those who are not committed to Jesus don’t generally come to church meetings. Whatever changes we make to services, and however warm the welcome we would offer, people who might be inquisitive are not disposed to express their curiosity in regular attendance at church meetings.

2) We are giving our attention to the wrong things



Having all the right gear is only part of fishing. Whatever tweed coat you are wearing, whatever the state of the boat in which you sit, and whatever type of rod you are wielding, the key thing is to present a hungry fish with bait that they are attracted to eating. If you don't do that, the rest of your efforts are in vain.

When speaking to Nicodemus, Jesus describes the Holy Spirit as a wind: 'you hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.' (John 3:8). We cannot tell in whom the Holy Spirit is working – it might be the 'fire-breathing' Saul of Tarsus (Acts 8:1ff) or it might be the woman dealing in fine cloth (Acts 16:14). The only way to find out is to present them with 'bait'.

But what is the right 'bait'? Changing the metaphor, in the parable of the sower, Jesus describes 'the seed' as representing the Word of God. The sower casts it everywhere, not knowing how it will be received.

For some (the path) it is rejected outright;
for others (the thorns) it is crowded out by other priorities;
for still others (the stony ground) it is scorched by persecution.
However for some (the good soil) it is received, and after time bears fruit.

There is no emphasis on the attributes of the sower himself – the power doesn't lie in him or her, but in the seed and its reception.

There are two key facts in Jesus' parable:

1) It is the Word of God that is offered.

People need to hear and see Jesus as He is revealed in the Scriptures. They may need to weigh, test, consider and question for a long time till they reach the place of 'bearing fruit'.

2) The Word is offered everywhere

We do not know where God's Sprit is at work but we know that in the person in whom he is at work, there will be a response

The colourful evangelist Arthur Blessit, who made his mark by walking around carrying a large cross, was one day at a church meeting that was discussing evangelism. As time progressed and talking appeared to be getting nowhere, he became so frustrated that he slipped out of the meeting and went down the street to a café.

He asked the girl at the counter if he could make an announcement. With the permission granted he identified himself as a Christian and asked if anyone would like to know more about Jesus. Initially there was a stunned silence; then a woman piped up that she had been thinking about Jesus and would be glad to talk.

Over the next while, he shared the News of Jesus. She simply believed and there and then committed herself to Him. Arthur asked her if she would accompany him to the church meeting. When she agreed, he took her back to the church and presented her to the gathering showing that while they had been endlessly discussing 'evangelism' this woman had heard and believed!

If in general, enquirers are not going to come among our church organisation and consider the Word of God, we have to be prepared to take the Word of God to them where they are. Their terms, their time.

We may think ourselves to be hopelessly bad at sowing; but however poor we actually are, if the Holy Spirit is at work, we hold that others will come to believe in Jesus.

A 'mersitem' may be one way of enabling that to happen.

A change in perspective?

From the Governor of New York,
to the President of the U.S.A.

31 January, 1829.

To President Jackson:

The canal system of this country is being threatened by a new form of transportation known as 'rail-roads.' The federal government must preserve the canals for the following reasons:

1) If the canal boats are supplanted by 'railroads', serious unemployment will result. Captains, cooks, drivers, hostlers, repairmen and dock tenders will be left without means of livelihood, not to mention the numerous farmers now employed in growing hay for the horses.

2) Boat builders would suffer and towline, whip, and harness makers would be left destitute.

3) Canal boats are absolutely essential to the defence of the USA. In the event of the expected trouble with England, the Erie Canal would be the only means by which we could ever move supplies so vital to waging war.

As you may well know, Mr President, 'railroad' carriages are pulled at the enormous speed of 15 mph by 'engines' which, in addition to endangering the life and limb of passengers, roar and snort their way through the countryside, setting fire to crops, scaring livestock and frightening women and children. The Almighty surely never intended people should travel at such breakneck speed.

Sincerely,

Martin Van Buren, Governor

(quoted by William A Beckham in 'The second reformation')

The dilemma for Mr Buren and others of his time was that society was changing. The Industrial Revolution had begun. Past and present lifestyles were becoming incompatible. Technological advance imposed a radically different lifestyle and outlook, with all the discomfort that would involve.

The temptation was to look back. 'The old ways have served us well in the past. Let's just keep them and try to make them work better.'

The danger was to ignore change. Had President Jackson heeded the call, the USA would have been 'frozen' in the 1820's. Travel *to* America would still be by boat, and *around* America by horse, cart and barge. Developments that culminated in space travel had to start somewhere, however unsettling at the time.

A similar dilemma faces the church in the modern world. There is much of the 'Martin Van Buren' amongst us all. Our way of 'doing' church has worked well in the past and we are reluctant to change it. In church we readily make use of developments in architecture, music and technology but we retain the same basic model. This, however, is similar to merely widening the canals to allow a faster boat speed: while it helps, it still does not synchronise with an altering lifestyle around us.

The dispute in 1829 was not about *goals*. They agreed that transport and communication were essential. It was about *method*: how could these goals best be achieved in the changing world of that day? Similarly, the goal of the church today remains ever the same: bringing in the Kingdom through the ministry of the Word and prayer. The question is how best can we do that in the the world of today?

The challenge for the church today is to recognise the enormous changes that have already happened in society and then to adapt the church's *lifestyle* (though not her *goals*) to engage with the world around us.

It may be harder for us to come to terms with this, because our 'canal system' has worked relatively well. But we dare not be complacent. I am frequently struck by how many people in our community are interested in the church and its message. They come to evenings for men or women, encourage their children to participate in our organisations or Holiday clubs, make use of the cafe or even attend Christmas events and yet cannot bring themselves to bridge the gap and participate in church life. For them 'Sunday' is not an acceptable way in.

This should make us examine our church habits in two ways:

a) for the benefit of those *within* the church. If those around us are unable to identify with our practices, could our members be operating in two different modes – *church mode* on Sundays, and *present day mode* the rest of the time?

b) for the benefit of those *outside* the church. Our concern must be to bring the reality of Christ in His Church to the attention of those around us in a way that is easiest for them.

Small groups of between two and four people, the 'meristems' of our title, seek to address this issue both for those within and without the church.

This booklet considers whether meristems are a tool that might enable the Word to grow and spread in the 21st century.

How ‘Meristems’ happened

I attended a meeting in George Street in Edinburgh at which the then General Secretary of the International Bible Society, Tom Houston, was speaking. He spoke from the text:

‘Enlarge the place of your tent, stretch your tent curtains wide, do not holdback; lengthen your cords, strengthen your stakes.’ (Isaiah 54:2)

He sought to encourage us to adapt and look outwards as we seek to share the Gospel with others. In doing this, he shared with us the experience of a church in the Ethiopian capital of Addis Ababa:

In the 1970’s, the communist regime of Mengistu came to power. It outlawed the church and it was forced underground. In the capital, the communist regime had organised itself into ‘cabals’ (small groups). A plan of these fell into the hands of the church. So as not to draw attention to itself, the church of some 5,000 agreed not to meet in groups of more than five.

When the regime was toppled, 18 years later, it was found that the church had grown ten-fold, to 50,000 !

Observations

a) Whatever the essence of the church may be, it is possible to ‘do’ it with five or less people and without crowds, bands, programs etc.

b) Groups must have grown to 5 in number and then split. So the groups must therefore have been mixed, seekers and believers.

c) Spiritual leadership for these small groups must have been assumed by many people, including those who recently believed

In Torrance, in the 1990’s, we decided to have a weekly men’s breakfast. Unsure of whether it’s purpose should be outreach or nurture, we decided to make a start and see where the Lord would lead!

We arranged to meet weekly on Thursdays in the church café from 7.00 to 7.45 am. About a dozen people came initially. The round tables meant we sat in groups of 3 or 4. The people came from very different backgrounds: some had been Christians for a long time, others were recent believers, and two who had been invited along by friends did not come on Sunday at all.

A **format** evolved over the first few weeks:

7.00 - 7.15	Breakfast (Roll, coffee and fruit)
7.15 - 7.20	Word
7.20 - 7.30	Discussion
7.30 - 7.40	Sharing (Family and work)
7.40 - 7.45	Prayer (for one another)

The Word was brought by different people each week. They read from the Bible, and gave some thoughts on the passage, ending with a question or point for discussion to help us apply it. In time, everyone in the group brought a word. One person spoke to the whole group, but the focus then returned to the round tables at which three or four people sat. We tried to keep to the schedule and stuck carefully to the promised finishing time, to let people get to work.

Observations:

a) After 2 years practically all those initially involved continued to participate. One or two came occasionally but stopped.

b) The format includes all the primary activities of the church: ministry of the Word, fellowship, prayer, eating together (Acts 2:42ff).

c) The breakfast met needs of all participants, from the seeker to the experienced believer.

d) 'Outsiders' were 'comfortable' participating in the church.

e) It made optimum use of time, achieving much in a brief, non-prime time.

f) It facilitated growth in individuals. All (including those who do not participate on Sunday) were willing to share in the ministry of the Word and prayer, many for the first time.

g) It was a great means of support and encouragement for a number in difficult times.

h) The group did not grow. Though we sat in 3-4s, it operated effectively as one group of 12-15, as people sat at a different table each week.

A Reflection

The issues were highlighted:

a) The 'closed shop' syndrome

We remarked that many people in our village were interested in the church, its message and activities. But as they see it, Sunday services were not for them; they did not belong there. They thought that if they came once they would be expected to come for evermore. It seemed that our present Sunday format was not an acceptable way in, whatever the style or the personal welcome.

b) The priesthood of the preacher.

An attitude prevails that the ministry of the Word is the exclusive domain of the minister, who alone can really understand the Bible and impart its wisdom to others. So we leave it to the professional on Sundays. The effect is that the word of God is 'rare' and doesn't 'grow and spread' as it did in the early church. The truth is that every believer under the direction of the Spirit of God is able to minister the Word to another, at least in ones or twos.

c) The size of the group

Though we sat in 3-4s and this made for greater participation, our identity was in the larger group. This made it harder for a new person to enter (and also for participants to ask new people along to).

A hypothesis

From our experience, we asked the question: could a brief, structured meeting that included all the prime activities of the church (Word, prayer, fellowship, hospitality) and involved between two and four people be a suitable building block for the church in 21st century Scottish culture? Could it encourage growth amongst believers, *plus* be a suitable avenue for those out-with the church to hear the Word of God and experience the fellowship of the Holy Spirit?

An experiment

I approached a member of the church who had professed faith nine years before but had not been involved in any Bible studies or prayer meetings. Though invited, he could not come to the men's breakfast as he left for work at 7.00am. I explained the above and asked him if he would like to try it out with me. He agreed. The non-prime time slot that we went for was, wait for it, 6.15am! Within three weeks he had prayed for me and brought a word. Another was added to our group, who had recently returned to church after a 10-year gap.

The next person I asked was a neighbour who did not come to church at all. He had said he was very daunted at the thought of coming on Sundays, and anyway, it was his only opportunity to play golf with his mates as he had to work on Saturdays. Within 3 weeks, he felt comfortable enough to pray aloud himself. We met for 8 weeks in May/June. In the Autumn, three new folk were added – a member of another church, a lapsed Roman Catholic neighbour and a recent believer.

The format was then tried by women as well as men and in a variety of settings - church cafe, homes, a pub, with students, and with people of different backgrounds. In all situations, participants seem to have benefitted.

The Biblical Basis

1) The immanence of God

The presence of Jesus among believers can be <u>detected</u> by others (1 Cor 14: 24,25).

In Matthew 18:20, Jesus said: *Wherever two or three come together in my name, there I am in the midst of them*. What does this mean? What are the implications?

The reality of God's Being is often expressed through other people: His authority (Ephesians 5:22), His justice (Romans 13:1ff), His love (1 John 4:7ff). So too it is with the presence of Jesus. Jesus said ministering to His brothers was in effect ministering to Him as well. (Matthew 25:40)

Though this applies to an individual believer, where two or more believers gather, the presence of Jesus becomes 'palpable'. It is at this point that the church is constituted and so the Head, Jesus, is present. It is not as an ethereal presence floating around them that he may be noted by others, but in the interpersonal relationships of his body - person to person, spirit to spirit - that He is present.

The sacraments express this reality. They are signs of our union with Jesus and with one another. They describe our relationship together. It is not in the ritual or the elements that God is present but in the relationships that they point to. Baptism describes the relationship of one entering the body of Jesus through faith, by His Spirit. The Lord's Supper expresses our on-going union with one another and Jesus and the basis on which it is achieved.

The person-hood of God is reflected through the person-hood of the believer. In the interaction of believers, He may be seen and recognised. In this way, He is often noted by those out-with the church. Though this may attract and stimulate them to seek God, it is in itself insufficient for them to know God. Just as a picture in a newspaper requires the interpretation and explanation of the article, so too the presence of Jesus requires the ministry of His Word to enable unbelievers to put their faith in him (Romans 10:17).

So we might say that Jesus is noticed and experienced through the person-hood of His followers, but He is believed and received through the preaching of the Word. The inter-relationship of the two in conversion is perhaps mirrored in the following observations in a survey of how people have come to faith

a) Very few were converted through one-off events like evangelistic meetings, street preaching etc.

b) 80% of those surveyed cited a friendship with a believer as the most important factor in drawing them to Christ.

To draw people to Himself, God uses both the revelation of His presence in the lives of believers and the revelation of His Truth through the preaching of His Word. Paul's expectation of this is seen in his letter to the church in Corinth. While cautioning them about the use of 'tongues' in public, he encourages them to prophesy or minister the word *to one another*. In this context he anticipates that unbelievers might recognise the presence of God within His people and understand their own need of salvation. (1 Corinthians 14:24,25)

What can we do to let the world around us see the reality of the promise of Jesus amongst His followers? As with all God's promises, the operative is faith. As we believe in His Word and act accordingly, so the promise is fulfilled.

How does this fact relate to our strategy and expectation in evangelism?

a) The context

Those outwith the church may meet believers as individuals. However, the only opportunity they may have to experience Christ *in the church* is usually to come to a Sunday service. Within this context they may certainly know Him through the preaching of His Word. However, given the impersonal nature of the large gathering, the reality of the presence of Christ in the relationships of His people might be obscured.

In general, the smaller the gathering of believers, the more intimate the inter-personal relations between the participants. The closer the relationships, the more on-lookers may detect the presence of Christ. (cf John 13:31)

b) The content

Meeting 'in His name' does not embrace a four-ball at golf – worthy pursuit though that is! 'In His name' implies a general recognition of the *purpose* of the gathering – to meet with Jesus. The church in Acts devoted themselves to The Word, prayer, fellowship and hospitality/breaking bread (Acts 2:42ff). These were the prime expressions of the common life of the church. As the church engaged in these pursuits and sought Christ together, He was present among them and 'daily there were added to their number those who were being saved.'

With this in mind, should we not be inviting those outwith the church to be participating with us in the life of the church at its simplest level? The 'outsider' would be an observer, not the centre or 'target' as in an evangelistic event. As for the outcome, our trust would be in the promise of the presence of Jesus. Our hope would be that, if God was at work in them, this may be the scenario in which they might notice Him in others and hear the Truth of Jesus through the ministry of His Word.

2) The church

The body / 'church' is constituted among two or more believers relating together in Jesus' name (Matthew 18:20)

a) The Church - a definition

The word 'church' is used to describe an organisation of believers. Nowadays a church would usually be expected to number between 30 and 300. What were the criteria used to devise the size of a unit a century or two ago?

i) Finance: A church would be expected to have one full-time, paid leader. To provide the funds to support him would take at least 30 people - or a rich patron.

ii) Buildings: Up to thirty people might be accommodated in a house-size structure - a larger number would require a purpose-built 'cathedral'.

iii) Social background: People in a locality related together in units: labourers on a farm, inhabitants of a village, workers in a near-by factory.

In the New Testament, however, the church never appears to be described by size or by organisation. As far as size was concerned, the term 'church' is used for the believers in Jerusalem – who numbered over 5000 members! It is also covers all the believers in Corinth (1 Corinthians 1:2), as well as those who met in the house of Aquila and Priscilla (1 Cor 16:9). As far as organisation was concerned, all believers were part of one church under the discipline and direction of the leadership in Jerusalem (Acts 15).

The NT church is described in terms not of organisation, but of **relationship…**

i) …to Jesus: the church is organic – part of a living entity, constituting the being of the Son of God – with Jesus as head, the Church being His body. All those who believe in Jesus are 'in Christ' and thus part of the church.

ii) …to believers: Those who believe in Jesus share his Spirit, by whom they have been adopted into His family - brothers and sisters in Christ. (Rom 8:14f)

The term 'church' is used as a 'collective' noun for believers, just as three or more geese gathering together constitute a 'flock'. Thus any meeting of believers that expresses the common life in Christ is 'church', including a family gathering, however small – even 2 or 3. At the same time, no gathering, however large, can be described as 'the complete Church' until all believers are assembled when Jesus returns.

Similarly, when Paul refers to the body of Christ, he is simply illustrating its diversity, not its limits. However small the gathering, even with two people, the diversity is expressed. However big the gathering, it is never expressed fully and so the body is not complete. Thus 'when two or three gather in Jesus'

name,' He is there (Matt.18:20). The body is constituted and the Head is present - it is 'the church' meeting together.

The Church is therefore described, at its simplest, not as a discrete institution but as a relationship. It exists where two or more believers relate together through their common faith in Jesus. Thus the family / body / church is present.

The expression of this reality is **acknowledged in both sacraments**. Baptism is a corporate activity - you cannot baptise yourself. It is into the one universal Church (1 Corinthians 12:13; Ephesians 4:4). The reformers stipulated that this should occur within the public worship of the community of believers. That is a desirable symbol of the integration of the newcomer to the family of God, but it is not essential. The Ethiopian's baptism was valid even though there were only two believers present - Philip and himself. As he believed in Christ, the body was constituted and the Head was present. Thus he was baptised into the body of Christ (Acts 8:26ff), as were Lydia and the Jailer in Philippi (Acts 16:11ff).

In the same way, the Lord's Supper is an expression of union with Jesus and with one another. It cannot be taken alone, but it may be may be shared with a gathering of two or more believers.

From Scripture, the Reformers identified a true church as one where 'the Word [was] purely preached, the sacraments administered according to Christ's ordinance, and discipline rightly exercised'*. That imposed order and structure on the church but it cannot be said to *define* the church. If it had been, Paul could not have addressed the believers in Corinth as 'the church', given their disorder and impropriety, e.g. over the Lord's Supper (1 Cor 1:2; 11:17ff).

In the New Testament, the church is described at different levels

The **universal** Church (Matthew 16:18)
The **local** church (1 Corinthians 1:2)
The **house** church (1 Cor 16:19; Romans 16:5; Col 4:15; Acts 5:42)
The **micro** church (Matt.18:20).

This four-level description is not militant ecumenism intent on returning to one monolithic structure. Nor is it a charter for *laissez faire* in the church. The church does indeed need order, structure and discipline; the Law needs to be applied within the church as well as outside it, to restrain sin and encourage Godly living. Rather, the four-level shape explains why we should expect the reality of the presence of Christ amongst His people (the church) to be expressed not in an institution, but in any meeting of believers in Jesus' name, however small, even two or three.

* *Articles Declaratory of the Church of Scotland, VII

b) The church – a *structure*

Crustaceans (e.g. crabs) have a 'carapace' – a hard outer shell. The process of growth only occurs when they shed that outer shell. At that point, the new outer surface is soft. Their body expands until the carapace hardens and so restricts any further growth.

This phenomenon is paralleled in the life of many churches. God has been at work. The church has grown, as new people have believed in Christ and been added to their number. However, there comes a point when the growth plateaus out, and stops. The occasional new person comes in, but that is balanced by those going out. Why does this happen?

Behind this there may be a subtle change of perspective. In the early days, as the church was growing, people were looking outward. Most of the participants at the heart of the church had the time, will and enthusiasm to share their faith with those around them. There was a general sense of shared responsibility for those outwith the church. Married to this, there were opportunities to bring friends into the life of the church in contexts that were acceptable to them.

However, as the church has increased in size, so has the structure. To sustain the organisation takes a lot of work. This is done by the willing minority. With the increasing work load within the church, there is less time to spend with friends and family. Under this pressure, members eventually settle for a life tending the organisation. A devilish device has been deployed with great effect, which has blunted the lives of those most likely to reach the world around with the Gospel. The church stops growing.

What are the characteristics of this change in perspective? Can we recognise it in ourselves and be liberated from its clutches?

i) A consumer mentality

Most societies or clubs seem to operate with a 20:80 ratio of producers to consumers: those who do the work and those who benefit from it. (Perhaps 10:90 in today's lack of commitment and low sense of common responsibility.)

In 'The Second Reformation', William Beckam writes about the Cell Church. He describes the consumer mentality as 'Constantine's cathedral paradigm':

- people go to a building ('church')
- on a special day (Sunday)
- and someone (a priest or a pastor)
- does something *to* them (teaching, preaching, absolution, healing)
- or *for* them (a ritual, entertainment)
- for a price (offerings)

It is a crude analysis, but much of the criticism from inside the church has an element of the attitude, 'I pay my subscription, so I'm entitled to the service'!

ii) An abrogation of responsibility

Personal responsibility for action tends to be off-loaded to the *organisation* in three areas: evangelism, pastoral care and nurture:

- **Evangelism.**

The expectation is that if we had the right services or outreach events, these would attract people in. The reality is that people are not attracted to *any* church meeting. In a recent survey of those who had believed in Jesus, over 80% stated that the main instrument God used was *a friendship.* If someone doesn't befriend those outwith the church and share the Gospel with them, experience shows they will not come in. Waiting for other people or activities (the leader, the services, the meetings etc.)to deliver new church members is a fruitless exercise.

One of the most subtle of temptations is to content ourselves with fervent prayer for revival and conversion of the nation, without attending to personal witness to the world around – faith without works. In essence we are asking God to breathe life into our church structure without us having to be personally involved in the 'making of disciples.'

- **Pastoral care**

Advice about care for the world around is often prefaced by the words, 'The church should ...'. The thought behind this may be well intentioned but the tendency is to offload personal duty on to church programmes. The danger is if The (organised) Church does, the (real) church doesn't!

- **Nurture**

Who should give encouragement to a new believer, help to someone seeking Christ, and instruction to our children in the way of the Lord? The church as a grouping ought to *assist*, but individuals bear the responsibility. In the case of our children, we parents are the ones who take the baptismal vow to 'teach them the truths and duties of the Christian faith'; we cannot offload this duty to the Sunday School or anyone else.

In all these areas the church as an organisation may support, encourage and enable us to fulfil these tasks, but it must never be expected to relieve church members of their individual responsibilities. In a congregation where this is the case, the carapace has well and truly hardened. Programmes, initiatives and re-organisation will not provide a cure. They will merely increase the workload of the faithful and exacerbate the problem.

c) The church – a *growing* concern

How can a church avoid a 'hardening of the shell' and keep looking outward?

i) Maintain responsibility. The basic unit of church life should be small enough and organised in such a way that each participant would

- *Feel able to contribute* freely in its operation and determining its direction.
- *Be encouraged to help* meet the needs of the others.
- *Be able to influence it* in such a way that it would be suitable for them to bring their friends among it.

ii) Encourage leadership throughout the church. In a large, static church structure, potential leadership may be stifled. Supervised opportunities should be given for initiative in leadership, especially in the basic units of church life.

iii) Organise a structure that is

- *Efficient,* in that it: attends to essential tasks; stewards time well; spreads the load and involves others.
- *Geared for growth*: expects new people to be added and cared for within the on-going life of the existing structure
- *Simple*: If a church can be constituted with 2 or more people, then the basic pattern of church life should be the same whether there are two believers or 5,000. To gauge simplicity, ask, 'If persecution came, could the heart of church life continue 'underground' without great changes?'

3) The Word of God

All scripture is useful, able to make wise to salvation (2 Timothy 3:16)
Jesus is evident throughout the Scriptures (Luke 24:27)
The power is in the Word, not its delivery (Hebrews 4:12)

As Christians, we believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have 'fallen asleep' in Him (1 Thessalonians 4:12). This is the cornerstone of our faith; indeed if it is not true, then we are more to be pitied than all men. (1 Corinthians 15:19)

We hold that Jesus is the 'eternal Word of God'. (John 1:1) Through His resurrection, Jesus 'was declared to be the Son of God'. (Romans 1:4). This means that in Bethlehem, 2000 years ago, God Himself was made flesh and lived among us (John 1:14). Jesus, though God the Son Himself, was limited by a human body. Through Him, God was communicating with mankind, not a little bit at a time, but all that He is, through a Human being. This was the centre point of history.

Jesus, looking back, acknowledged the Old Testament itself to be the ultimate authority. To detect and resist temptation Jesus three times said, 'it is written' (Luke 4:8). He spoke of the scriptures as being the very 'Word of God' (Matthew 15:6). In the Old Testament 'the Word of the Lord' came to many people beginning with Abraham. (Genesis 15:1).

Looking forward, the New Testament speaks of the change Jesus brought: 'In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets but in these last days he has spoken to us by His Son'. (Hebrews 1:1).

Before He died, was resurrected and returned to the Father, Jesus promised the disciples that he would come again to them in the power of His Holy Spirit and lead them into all truth (John 16:13). This he did; the New Testament is the result – the 'Word of God' revealed through the Apostles.

The Scriptures are therefore believed to be, in their entirety, the Word of God, God's communication to man. Though the scriptures are entrusted to mere people, the power does not lie in the human proclaimer, but with the Word of God Himself and however he chooses to communicate with us.

The Apostle Paul, alluding to his arrival alone in Corinth (Acts 18:1ff), said his message and its telling were *'not with wise and persuasive words but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might rest not on men's wisdom but on God's power'* (1 Cor 2:4). Compare 1 Thess 1:13: *We also thank God … because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is at work in you who believe.'* It is God who has the power and who chooses to reveal Himself. The task of man is to 'sow the seed', trusting that some will fall on 'good soil' (Luke 8:5ff). It is only when the Word of God is proclaimed that we find out who the Lord's people are (Acts 10:10).

In revival times, God may work instantly. More usually, it may take months or years for someone to believe in Jesus. Often a person has to hear the Word of God many times before he or she believes. An OMF worker sharing the Gospel with Chinese students in Manchester observes that those who come to believe only do so after they have been involved with Bible study for two years! Why should it be any different for un-churched Westerners?!

One of the simplest and least threatening ways of sharing the word of God with another person is to **invite them to read a Gospel with you**. If they are 'hungry' enough and the situation is 'low pressure' enough, they may, if God is at work, be willing to do so.

'Meristems' are designed to be as low key as you can get! They are small, informal, yet rooted in the Bible. If the Lord is at work in a person's life, they may be willing to meet round the Word of God in such an on-going way. It could be the means God uses to bring them to believe in Jesus!

4) The priesthood of all believers

(1 Peter 2:9)

All may know the Lord for themselves *(see* ***Hebrews 8:11)***

The ministry of Teacher is one that is authoritative and specific. *(see* ***James 3:1)***

All Christians can teach and as they mature can help others to learn.

(*See* ***Hebrews 5:12)***

What are preaching and teaching, and who does them?

a) Preaching

There are a number of Greek words in the New Testament often translated into English by the one word, 'preach'. Three are linked to the English word, 'angel', which means 'messenger'.

Kerusso	herald (as in public crier), publish, proclaim, announce
Diaggello	herald thoroughly (*pronounced:* dee-ang-*ghel*-loh)
Euaggelizomai	announce good news (*pron:* you-ang-ghel-*lids*-oh-my)
Kataggello	proclaim–(*pronounced:* kat-ang-*ghel*-loh)
Laleo	talk
Dialegomai	say thoroughly, discuss, argue, reason

The first four words above are usually translated, 'preaching'. This involves a declaration of news. Implicit in the use of these words is:

i) the pronouncement of something *new* or *newsworthy.* It may be new in content, timing, etc) A messenger (*aggelos*) does not need to impart 'news' the hearers already know.

ii) the expectation of action in response.
Both Jesus and John the Baptist proclaimed (*kerusso*) 'the kingdom of God is near – repent' (Matt. 3:2; 4:17).

This act (*euaggelizo*) is therefore always 'evangelistic'. It is making the 'news' of Christ known to those who previously hadn't heard of or received Him, and eliciting a response to follow Him. It is therefore primarily for those who have not heard or not received the news, namely unbelievers.

Euaggelizo' and *'Kerusso'* appear generally to have been activities that happen with unbelievers in mind and therefore would occur outwith 'the church'. Philip proclaims (*kerusso*) Christ to the Samaritans (Acts 8:5) and when Paul writes to a church he tends to speak of the Gospel that was preached to them (*kerusso*) in the past tense (eg 2 Cor 1:19; 11:7), before they believed.

b) Teaching

Is there a distinction between teaching and preaching? Matthew reports that 'Jesus went about… teaching (*didasko*) in their synagogues and proclaiming (*kerusso*) the gospel of the kingdom' (Matthew 9:35). So the two words are not synonymous. The implication may be that *one* of Jesus' methods of preaching the Gospel was that he *taught* in the synagogues.

If that is so, it would appear that 'preaching' is directed outwardly to the general populace, a general term encompassing all that is involved in making the Gospel known in word and deed. 'Teaching' however is a more specific activity involving instruction by one with superior knowledge.

In Ephesians 4:11, Paul describes God's different gifts to the church. Along with that of Apostle and Prophet he cites the Preacher (*euaggelistes*) and the Teacher (*didaskalos*). All of these ministries have the purpose of 'equipping the saints for works of service'. The expectation is therefore that all who are ministered to will in turn minister to others.

This does not mean that everyone should become an Apostle, Prophet, Preacher or a Teacher. It does imply that we should all amplify these ministries. Thus we are all 'sent' (Luke 9:2; 10:1; Acts1:8), all may prophesy (1 Cor 14:1,5), all are evangelists (2 Tim 4:5) and all are teachers (Col 3:16). So Paul implies that all should be apostles, prophets, evangelist and teachers (with a small 'a','p', 'e' and 't') in that we will pass on what we have gained to others.

From this distinction it follows:

i) There are two different ministries in the church - Evangelising and Teaching.

ii) Some are called to be an Evangelist and Teacher but their ministry is to equip the rest of the church to do the work of evangelising and teaching.

iii) All are called and engaged to do both activities. For instance:

Examples in Acts chapter 8

8:1,4	those… scattered, preached the Word	*euaggelizomai*
8:5	Philip proclaimed Christ	*kerusso*
8:25	Peter and John spoke the Word …	*laleo*
8:25	preaching the Gospel in Samaritan villages	*euaggelizomai*
8:35	Philip preached Jesus to the Ethiopian	*euaggelizomai*

From these we learn that:-

a) *preaching* the Word is synonymous with preaching Jesus

b) Peter and John *spoke* the Word to believers

c) the scattered believers *preached* (the apostles were not scattered (8:1))

c) Conclusions?

i) 'Preaching' is what *all* believers do – make known the good news of Christ to those who do not believe (Romans 10:14). It is not the preserve of the leaders, though some have this as their 'Ministry' (Ephesians 4:11 *'Euaggelistes'*)

ii) Teaching is another ministry. We teach believers so as to encourage and lead them towards obedience and holiness. It is the means by which we find out *about* God, but not the means by which we come to *know* God (Hebrews 8:11). It is not the preserve of the leaders, though once again, there are some who have this as a 'Ministry' (Eph. 4:11 *'Didaskalous'*)

iii) If this is reflected in our churches, it might be that the main 'services' are an opportunity to teach believers (cf the meeting in the Colonnades in Acts 5:12); the believers (as well as the leaders) thereafter do the 'preaching' from house to house (Acts 5:14, 42).

d) Implications?

i) The term 'preaching' cannot be restricted to describe an activity by a select group of the church performed at a certain time.

ii) *All* may preach / minister the word

If, as the reformers held, 'to prophesy' in 1 Corinthians 14:1ff equates with what we now call 'expository preaching', or declaring the Word of God, then it is Paul's hope that all may be involved in it.

At the Reformation, people re-discovered the priesthood was unnecessary; but reformed churches today seem to have a new version of it – 'the priesthood of the preacher'! The error lies in thinking that ordinary believers need a mediator between them and the Word of God! The implication is that we cannot understand the Word or hear God speak to us unless we have the right preacher or the right notes to 'teach us to know God' (cf Hebrews 8:11).

The reality is that God may speak from His Word **to** all his church and therefore **through** all his church, to one another, and to those outwith the church.

At the same time, the ministries of the Preachers and Teachers are essential for the growth and wellbeing of the whole church. (Ephesians 4:11-13)

5) The prime activities of the church

These are described in a crucial passage, Acts 2:42ff, after the Spirit had been given at Pentecost and the church been formed.

Here it says that the newly formed group of believers in Jesus *devoted itself* to four things:-

The Apostles' teaching

This was the Ministry of the Word, on the foundation of the Prophets and Apostles (Ephesians 2:20) – the Old and New Testaments.

The Prayers

Praying was *in Jesus' name* as He had promised. (John 14:13,14)

Fellowship

This was an expression of the unity of believers in and through the church / the body of Jesus. (1 Corinthians 12:27)

Breaking of bread

Though this may have later been formalised into a ritual (1 Cor 11:17ff), in the early stages of the life of the church, it seems simply to have referred to Christians eating together. The giving thanks and breaking of bread at every meal would remind the Apostles and early Christians of Jesus' action at the last supper.

The 'church *visible'* is a human organisation with a 'constitution'. However, when people who believe in Jesus and submit to the Word of God meet together in the Body of Jesus, in the light of His death for us, then the 'church *invisible'* is constituted.

This may be represented by thousands (Acts 4:4) or simply two or three meeting in Jesus name (Matt 18:20).

Sociological Background

Why does church attendance still decline, when more people tell the pollsters they believe in God and pray than at any time over the last 50 years? Back then, people seeking spiritual answers came to church; now they prefer to pursue the enticements of 'the new age'. Do we no longer 'scratch where people itch'? Society has changed and the church hasn't - therein lies the problem. We live out a model of church developed in the post industrial revolution, unchanged for a hundred years. In fact church 'culture' is now totally different from that of the world around us. Have we something to learn from our missionaries?

When people are being prepared for service overseas in the name of the Gospel, one of the key areas of attention is **'Cross cultural mission'**. This describes the process of presenting the Gospel to people whose culture and way of life differs from our own. The challenge is to present the Gospel to them without expecting them also to adopt the culture of the ones who present it.

Much 19th and early 20th century mission was done on the coat tails of the Empire, with little attempt to distinguish between the Gospel and the British way of life. Thus many churches planted overseas 100 years ago still reflect UK patterns of church life. Recently I heard a man describe visiting an Anglican Church in South Africa. The service had followed the old prayer book liturgy with old English hymns and was staid and formal. It wasn't until the service had finished that the Africans began to sing - and the church came alive!

Hudson Taylor, founder of the China Inland Mission, adopted a radically different approach. Rather than trying to impose a western framework on the Chinese, he adopted theirs – he ate their food, dressed in their style, spoke their language, adopted their customs and even grew a pigtail. He is often seen as 'the father of modern mission'. The goal is to identify in every way possible with the people one wants to reach, without compromising the Gospel, letting them respond to the call of Jesus in ways that are culturally natural to them.

The need for 'cross cultural mission' has been brought to our own doorstep in the UK by the immigration of different ethnic groups. They tend to live in communities, maintaining their identity and their customs. British church life is strange, unfamiliar and uncomfortable to them; they'd be unlikely to endure it long enough to hear and receive our message in such a context. The task of the church in such areas is to get alongside these folk, present the Gospel and encourage them to follow Jesus in a way that is natural to them.

What does this teach us about **our mission where we are?** True, our expression of church life is broadly an inheritance of a bygone era. However, there is an increasing realisation that the culture has so shifted it can no longer identify with church life as we know it. This has led to much change in the way

we conduct services – music, seating, atmosphere etc., hoping those outside will see the changes and want to come to the church and join in. But are these alterations enough?

Changes that seem good and worthwhile to those within the church are not sufficient to bridge the culture gap with those outside. The changes in society have been far more fundamental than we might imagine. Why is it that people find it so hard to cross the threshold and so reluctant to come, even to a warm, welcoming and contemporary church service? What is it that is so foreign to them about all that goes on? Here are some suggestions:

a) Crowds

Participation and interaction with others in a large group has become unusual. At a football match, people are part of a large crowd, but it is anonymous. You don't have to relate to others. In a pub the crowd may be large, but you sit with a handful of friends.

So the prospect of a Sunday gathering of 200, where people know each other and will notice you, is daunting. With the fragmentation of society and the nuclear family, it is unusual for people to relate to and converse with more than one or two others at a time.

b) Music

Singing together was a common occurrence 50 years ago – choirs, bands, in the home round the piano. Now it's just an odd Karaoke night, a bawl at a football match, or a mass gatheiring at a music festival! Congregational singing, especially when the songs are unknown, is not a common pleasure.

c) Time

Before Television, time weighed heavily on people's hands. It had to be filled. Now, instant entertainment and the increasing demands of work squeeze out all other activities outside the home. People are reluctant to yield their free time to anything other than relaxation or concerted effort of their choice.

Put like that, it may seem surprising that we expect the nervously interested to buy into our church culture to check out the claims of Jesus. It is no wonder they are reluctant to subject themselves to the trauma that they might feel if they came to our meetings.

Perhaps it is us who have got to be prepared to change? If the Sunday services primarily suit those within the church, how at another time and in another way, might we 'cross the culture' to present the Gospel to those outside?

The challenge to us is this: how can we share the Word of God with those around us, who might be interested, but who will not come to our type of meetings? What type of meeting are *they* used to? What environment are *they* comfortable in? What time and length of meeting would suit them and *their* lifestyle? In what manner would *they* find it easiest to hear the gospel?

The starting point is perhaps to identify the **basic size of a relational unit**. In what environment are people around us most comfortable when relating to others? This varies from culture to culture and has changed down the years in Scotland. In times past families were large, work was corporate and entertainment was social. People were used to gathering together, talking and interacting in larger numbers.

Today, most people live in households of less than four people. Work is individual. Our lifestyle tends to insulate us from social interaction. The consequence is that people are comfortable with one or two others but generally have become very shy of any gatherings of more than a few people, especially if they are unsure what the group might expect of them. For these reasons, people are very reluctant to come to our services under *any* circumstances.

This situation is not new. In the early church, 'All the believers used to meet together in Solomon's Colonnades. No one else dared join them, even though they were highly regarded by the people' (Acts 5:13f). Nothing would induce them to 'go to church' even though they liked the Christians. At the same time, however, 'more and more men and women were added to their number' (Acts 5:14). How did this happen? Could it be that it was only after people believed in Jesus in the house gatherings that they went to the big meeting in the Temple?

If there is a similar problem in our church today, it is insufficient to keep titivating our large meetings in the hope that, one day, people might suddenly want to start joining in. The church's response must be to re-examine our church organisation and engage with today's society. To this end, we need to tailor our structures, *not our message*, to suit it.

If we did so, **what would the basic church gathering that might engage the culture look like?**

a) It would have just a few people.
b) The duration would be short
c) Timing would be flexible to fit in with busy schedules, shifts etc.
d) There would be no singing.

The church would engage in the prime activities of its life (Bible, prayer, friendship, hospitality) in these gatherings.

This then would be the environment into which we might expect the church to bring their friends. People who had seen enough of the grace of Jesus to interest them, who knew and trusted the believers, might be willing to come along and find out more.

This would be **the point of contact with** the world around. There would of course then be larger gatherings as well - on Sundays etc., to express the life of the wider church and to be taught from the Word of God by those called and gifted to be Teachers. Would it work? It's worth a try!

Church Growth in the 21st Century

We in the Church of Scotland pride ourselves on the parish system. Its intention is that every part of the country has a church that is responsible for the people within its locality.

When it was conceived, people lived in communities, which became the basis of parishes. The community shared common threads in its life – the people lived within its bounds, worked together, enjoyed recreation together, used the same local shops and amenities and many participated in the local church. The church was a common reference point at the heart of the community. Believers would thus be likely to be working beside members of the same church. Their relationship would be an expression of 'church' in the work place. Others who might have been interested by this expression of the presence of Christ could join in the wider life of their local church.

How life has changed! People who live in Torrance near Glasgow may now work in Stirling (20 miles away), shop in Kirkintilloch(3 miles away), enjoy the recreational facilities of 'Virgin Active' in Milngavie (5 miles away) and holiday on the Costa Brava! (990 miles away)! Within these spheres the church in Torrance has no axis. Adults with such a lifestyle could live out their lives in these situations without contacting anyone from the church in Torrance.

The implication of this is that there may be no expression of the life of the church within these settings. The temptation then is to see the locations where we spend most of our time merely as places of work or recreation; there is no vision for the collective work of God in them. Any who might be drawn through personal witness have little opportunity to follow it up; someone from Paisley who works in Glasgow beside one of our church members is unlikely to drive 15 miles on a Sunday to 'drop in' on our church meetings in Torrance!

The reality is that communities have in the main disintegrated, leaving parishes 'high and dry.' Communities with the church at the centre have been replaced by geographical areas where the local minister is responsible for funerals and weddings.

As society changes around us, we need to rethink how we express our life as the church. Most of our waking hours may be spent away from our homes. Is God present and are we willing to make Him known by His Word, through His church within these settings?

Some people started '**meristems'** at their work. Either before work or during a lunch hour they met with others for about 40 minutes. During this time they ate, read the Bible, discussed, shared concerns and prayed. With 2 or 3 together, the

church is constituted and Jesus is present. In their activities, they engage with essentials of church life. Within this context, as well as benefiting themselves, they have provided an opportunity for some who were interested to come among them and take the first steps to begin to follow Jesus.

This may provide the basis for a different model for church life that coincides with modern lifestyle. The expectation is not to try and pull all expressions of church into a central place. That would be like trying to follow the example of King Canute – the tide is flowing against us and there is nothing we can do about it! Rather the local church becomes the centre that encourages and equips its members to 'plant churches' in the different situations in which they live and work. They are connected to and overseen by the churches of which individuals are members, but the life of the church is lived out beyond the bounds of its locale.

The way it might work is this. You identify another believer in your work place and ask them to start meeting for lunch once a week to do a 'meristem'. Or a friend at your Zumba class or on your playgroup rota has been asking questions about God. After a while you invite him/her to join you one lunchtime to see what you are doing. (S)he enjoys the fellowship and concern of others and is stirred to find out more. You put him/her in contact with a church near their home which runs an Alpha course . . .

The book of Acts describes how the early church grew in Jerusalem. In chapter 8, after the start of a fierce persecution, the church was scattered throughout Judea and Samaria, though the Apostles remained in Jerusalem. The result was that ordinary believers preached the word and new churches sprang up throughout the region. If our churches resist the temptation to be 'parochial' and encourage the church to scatter, perhaps the Word of God would begin to grow and spread through our nation.

Are we willing to take our part and bear our responsibility under God in this?

Reflections

A case of perspective

Archbishop William Temple said that 'the church is the only organisation that exists for those who are not its members'.

Sadly, we have allowed ourselves to be subtly turned inward. It is not that we are not working hard; it is just that where we work, it is not having an effect. Most committed church members find all their time absorbed in family, work and church.

The hope is that if we get it right in the church, people will want to come in and join us. The trouble is that, in general it is not happening. People are not coming into church gatherings to explore spiritual questions.

Members of the church have to meet non-church members where they are comfortable and let them explore their questions in the light of God's Word.

It has been said that Muslims need to be contacted with the Gospel 40 times before they will believe. Why should it be any different for those brought up in a nominally Christian country?

If someone is interested and the Lord is at work in them, they need an on-going, low-pressure opportunity to look at the life of Jesus in the Word of God.

The invitation – 'Finding the Lord's people'

Paul was contemplating leaving Corinth after another rejection by his own people, the Jews, in Acts 18. But that night, during a dream, the Lord spoke to Paul. In it He told him, 'Do not be afraid ..... keep on speaking ..... for I have many people in this city'. The challenge to Paul when he awoke was to *find* the Lord's people.

The problem was that it was not apparent who the Lord's people were! Some of the most antagonistic were perhaps those whom the Lord was challenging, as he himself had been (Acts 9)! All Paul could do was give people the opportunity of hearing the Word and then it was between them and the Lord.

When faced with evangelism we often wrongly feel the onus is on us. We are reluctant to ask people for fear of personal rejection. We feel that it all depends on us - and if we don't get it right:

a) Our relationship will be compromised. Someone saying 'no' will imagine we take it as a personal rejection, creating awkwardness between us.

b) An opportunity will be lost. Through our inadequacy, someone who might believe does not now have the opportunity.

There is a lie here. It is that a person's salvation depends *on us* – on our witness, our presentation of the Gospel. We have been commissioned, so if people don't believe, it must be due to our inadequacy! The opposite is the case.

All salvation is an act of God. '*Unless the Lord builds the house, its labourers labour in vain'* (Ps 127:1). It depends on the Word of God and the operation of the Holy Spirit. We cannot predict or anticipate where the He may be at work. '*The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit'* (John 3:8).

Our charge is to give everyone possible an opportunity to hear the message and to leave the rest to them. The sower scattered the seed all over (Luke 8:4ff). After hot, dry weather in the middle east, all the ground looks the same. The seed is cast over all the ground and *then* is ploughed in. It is not carelessness that puts the seed among thorns, but ignorance: he cannot see where the good soil is. So as we share the gospel with people we have no idea who will respond. We therefore want to give all a chance to hear.

A 'meristem' may be that opportunity to hear the Gospel in an environment that is as 'neutral' as is possible in present society. Whether people are interested enough to respond or not is then a matter between God and themselves.

Making it count

Levi held a large banquet for 'tax collectors and others' after he had left everything and followed Jesus (Luke 5:27-29).

He did not try to bring his friends to Jesus but rather brought Jesus to his friends. They would have been ostracised by religious folk and awkward in any kind of formal meeting. However, they were comfortable in the environment Levi chose and willing to listen within the familiar context of a banquet held by one of their own.

When challenged, Jesus said that it was not the healthy who needed a doctor but the sick. '*I have not called the righteous but sinners to repentance'*. For those who did not know their need of Him, Jesus had little to say.

He could not, in his restricted, human form, convict a person of their need of Him; that was the work of the Holy Spirit (John 16:8). He could only minister where he saw the Father at work (John 5:19).

We are similarly limited. If the Lord is not at work in a person's life we cannot persuade them of their need of Him. We are obliged to look for where the Lord is at work, to search out those who are 'looking for a doctor'.

'Finger wagging' at people to tell them how much they need Jesus is a fruitless exercise. If the Lord is not at work they will not respond. What the church can

do is let the world know Jesus' appeal to them and leave it to the Holy Spirit as to who will respond

Reaching the 'timid'

It is often thought, 'We are here in church and are ready to share the Gospel. If people are not joining us it is because they are not interested.' That may be the case for a few; but for most, what we are offering is in such a strange and 'threatening' circumstance, they cannot access it.

My grandfather used to feed a chaffinch from his hand. This was not a situation that came about by chance! It was carefully engineered.

A taste of the nut was given and then very slowly the point of feeding was brought nearer the human donor. Painstakingly slowly, confidence was built so that eventually, the bird would eat from his hand.

Currently non-church members are like the chaffinch. They are far too timid to just 'fly' into the church and 'eat the nuts', however hungry they are. The environment is so strange and threatening that they would rather 'die' than enter on a Sunday. (For weddings, baptisms and funerals, the threat is invisibly removed).

They need to be cajoled, courted and enticed. The first taste needs to be in a very safe and neutral environment. If what they receive engages them and if they are '*hungering and thirsting for righteousness'* (Matt 5:6), then they may be prepared to take the next, tentative step.

The meristem seeks to be the lowest and least threatening way that a person can be introduced to church, to start looking at an account of Jesus' life and '*tasting and seeing that the Lord is good'* (Ps 34:8)

All 'evangelists'?!

We may not all be gifted as evangelists (Eph. 4:11) but like Paul's timid friend, Timothy, we are all called to do the work of an evangelist (2 Tim 1:7; 4:5).

Church members may feel called to help and enable others within the church. However this must never be to the exclusion of sharing the Gospel of Jesus with those outside the church.

Gradually over the past while, church members have bought into a lie – 'If we make church and church services attractive enough, people will want to come in'. The 'deception' has been the direction we have faced.

Thus men and women have served the organisation of the church with the hope that people will be attracted by it and come in. However for most of us that simply has not and is not happening. Maybe we have reached an impasse similar to the early church in Acts 5:13. '*None dared join them, even though they were highly regarded by all the people'*.

However it should be noted that at that time Luke said, '*Nevertheless more and more men and women believed in the Lord and were added to their number'* (Acts 5:14). People were hearing and believing outwith the larger church gatherings, and then joining in later. It was in the extended households where they were relaxed and unthreatened that they weighed the Gospel (2:46,47). Thus all of the church post-Pentecost was involved in outreach.

For 21st century Scotland the context may be different, (it is much smaller: 2-4 people is our comfort zone), but the calling is the same. All of us have friendships out with the church. All of us can read through a Gospel with a friend or two. Perhaps, like Timothy, all we need is the courage to ask!

Starting where they are?

In 21st century Scotland, the culture has various features that the church needs to address as it seeks to embrace those out with its borders:

1) Interests

In the main, people share a pool of common values and

a) Believe in God, or at least acknowledge the spiritual
b) Seek friendship
c) Enjoy talking together
d) Value being prayed for

2) Communal size

In general, whether at home, work, or recreation, people relate to each other in groups of two to four and are daunted by larger social gatherings.

3) Time

Lives are busy. Work is demanding. Family life is full. Free time is cherished and often spent 'relaxing'.

4) Commitment

There is a reluctance to enter into any commitment that could go on indefinitely. An 'opt out' is thus a desirable pre-requisite to trying anything new. A period of 7 weeks enables

a) The initial awkwardness of start-up to be overcome
b) A fair trial of the method
c) A finite time that someone may be willing to commit to.

Application?

Interface

What might the church's interface with today's society look like if it were to allow people to 'come by night' like Nicodemus (John 3:2)? It must allow them time to consider Jesus. After all, Nicodemus took almost three years before he 'broke cover' and went with Joseph of Arimathea to Pilate to receive Jesus' body (John 20:39). Here is a model –

1) In our culture, a basic building block of the church would be very small group with the following features:
   a) size: 2 – 4
   b) timing: weekly, 45-60 minutes – but not from 'prime time'
   c) activity: ministry of Word, eating and drinking, sharing, prayer
   d) duration: they would operate in blocks of around 7 weeks.

2) The goal of these groups would be Growth in four ways:
   a) in love. The intimacy of the small, regular meeting encourages the sharing of joys and trials, and so lets us meet each other's needs.
   b) in knowledge. The regular focus on the Word of God and the sharing around it will increase depth of knowledge.
   c) in maturity…
      i) … in learning to pray and share God's Word together
      ii) … in providing opportunity for leadership and initiative.
   d) in number, as they provide a familiar and comfortable context for those outwith the church. In them, they are able to come among the church, experience the presence of Jesus and look at his Word, without being the focus of attention.

Outreach is part of their life. They are 'church', not evangelistic groups.

As the group gets larger (4-5), the expectation is that it would *divide* and multiply, to enable further people to be added. Hence our title, '**MERISTEM'*** This small and flexible expression of church may be a means of introducing church to 21st century culture.

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* **meristem** |ˈmerəˌstem noun, Botany: a region of plant tissue, found chiefly at the growing tips of roots and shoots and in the cambium, consisting of ***actively dividing cells forming new tissue.*** From Gk *meristos,* divisible.

Running a Meristem

Before you start

Some people feel ill-equipped and nervous in case someone will ask a question they could not answer. Others plan to answer by regurgitating sermons past!

The reality is that in a 'meristem', *the Bible* is the teacher! There is no onus on 'the leader' of the meristem to come up with the right answer. Each point of view is respected then held against the plumb-line of the Word.

Many people are very tentative as they approach the Bible. Whatever their bluster (!) they feel that their ignorance will be exposed and they will be made to feel foolish. Debate and argument are robust forms of verbal interaction. Most folk have little experience of it and prefer to shy away from it.

The goal of the meristem is to encourage them to read the Word of God carefully for themselves and respond to it. Any challenge from others is meant to come in a low-key way that is directly related to the Word.

'Meristems' are thus based on the fact that the 'teacher' is the Word of God. The Bible is quite capable of standing on its own two feet! This does not deny the God-given ministry of Pastor and Teacher (Ephesians 4:11) in its proper setting. However it does mean that in this restricted setting it is vital that we let the Word of God do His work and together we sit at His feet

It was Charles Spurgeon who said *"Defend the Bible? I would as soon defend a lion! Unchain it and it will defend itself."*

Whom to ask?

Start small by thinking of **one** other person who might join you. Ask God to point them out. It could be another Christian at work, or someone from the edge of or outside the church. Perhaps you detect God is already at work in them. If they are young in the faith and new to such things, it sets the 'ethos' for the group. But if two 'mature' believers start it, it may be daunting for others to join. Look for a 'man of peace' (Luke 10:6), one of 'God's people' (Acts 18:9).

There is often an 'awkward' phase as we start something new with others. The more people present, the greater the pressure is likely to be on the leader.

Uncertainty often makes people nervous: what will I have to do? Explain that it is a series of meetings, lasting around 7 weeks, and they are welcome to come for a week or two to see how it works. Describe the format briefly (see below) and leave them with a 'Meristems' leaflet.

Don't hurry. When broaching the subject of perhaps meeting together, give people time to think, e.g. a couple of days to mull it over. Only then offer a date to try it out, if they are willing.

Don't take a refusal personally. If you have brought the water to them, in a way that is within their reach and they don't drink, it may be because they are not thirsty. That is between them and the Lord! Respect their choice.

The format **(**If you have 45 minutes; only extend by agreement)

1) **Eat** - Food and drink - in any form! 5 minutes

2) **Read** The Word of God is central. One reads a passage aloud. 2 minutes
Provide the same Bible translation for each person.
Preparing before is a *great* help to the time together

3) All ask **questions** the passage throws up, whether they know 3 minutes
the answer or not. You could jot them down.
No-one offers answers *yet,* or it stops the flow of questions. Questioning allows everyone to contribute on an equal footing, which is vital to let newcomers speak.

4) **Discussion** – Let it flow. 14 minutes
Encourage people to find answers to the questions raised and react to what it says. Let them digress (within limits!): it is not just a Bible Study. If your group has more than two, try to 'bring in' all the members. If you all agree you have more than 45 minutes available, add the extra time to this section.

5) **Conclusion** – 5 minutes
Try to agree on what is the *key verse,* if there is one, and what is the *main point* of the passage. What does the passage show us about God? What should we do?

6) **Application** 1) What does it show us about God? 10 minutes
2) What should I do?

7) **Sharing** – This relates to the time of prayer. 5 minutes
Encourage people to share the joys and trials of their personal situations - family, work etc. Ask, 'How are *you*? What's on *your* mind?' not just requests for prayer for others.

8) **Prayer** a) Reassure people before you pray that not everyone 1 minute
is expected to speak out loud. You will start. Pray for one person in the group.

   b) Model short prayers that others can easily imitate. Two sentences maximum, avoiding 'churchy' language!

   c) Try to make sure everyone is prayed for.

   d) Keep the time for prayer short to start with. It may be, as the group becomes more comfortable, this time stretches.

The Bible in Meristems

Sharing round the Word of God is central to *all* forms of church life.

Meristems aim for growth – growth in number as others join in, and growth in maturity of the individual. Part of this growing up is learning to hear God's voice as He speaks in and through His Word. So don't let the meristem become a teaching session where one imparts knowledge to another. Let participants explore God's Word for themselves and share it with one another.

Every one reads the agreed passage during the week, allowing questions to form; writing them down in advance saves time when the group meets.

'*Hearing the Word'* teaches folk how to read the Bible for themselves. Here is a simplified version of the outline it uses:

Preparing

Read the passage. Put aside your preconceptions; see what the passage is really saying. (Don't *tell* the passage what to say, *listen* to it!)

1) LOOK (What does it *say*?)
   Read the text carefully.
   What questions does it raise: Who, what, When, where, Why, how?
   What surprises or confuses you?
   Read other passages in the Bible it reminds you of.

2) LEARN (What does it *mean*?)
   How would you answer the questions you raised?
   How can you resolve issues that surprised or confused you?
   Give an overall picture of the passage in a few sentences

3) LISTEN (What is God's *message*?)
   What is the lesson or the main point of the passage?
   Which verse best sums up the message of the passage? How?

4) LIVE (How should we *respond*?)
   What does it show us about God?
   (His nature and character, His grace, Jesus and His salvation)
   What should I do?

Practicalities

Always finish at the pre-arranged time.

Don’t change the pattern without the agreement of the others. Be ready to shorten it again when new folks come in.

Don’t ‘correct’. Modern people in the West clam up when they feel ‘got at’. Let the other person(s) interact with the word. ‘That’s very interesting,’ and ‘I hadn’t thought of that,’ can be a suitably neutral type of reply to their suggestions!

Don’t make newcomers the focus of attention or put them on the spot. Let them be spectators as much as they wish. Do not let them be embarrassed by their lack of knowledge or understanding. Make sure their concerns are prayed for.

Once a new person is comfortable, ask if he or she would like to read the passage next week. Later you could ask if they would like to pray, for example, before you read the Word. It is wise to ask in private and in advance, so no-one knows if they decline. At a later time perhaps they will pray for you. You could share something personal that shows that you are vulnerable and ask them to say a word of prayer for you.

At the start of the next seven-week block, make it easy for people leave. Don’t presume anyone will want to continue. Ask everyone if they would like to participate for the next block. This approach will mean that the gathering may shrink from time to time, but the open ethos will make it easier for people to join in the long run.

Don’t become exclusive. When the group is settled together, invite others in. Assure them that nothing will be required of them and that they may just look on if they wish, and leave if it is not what they want.

But try not to add too many new people too quickly. It might actually stifle growth, like putting too much wood on a new fire.

When the group gets to four or five, introduce to the agenda the idea of splitting/change. Allow people time to come to terms with the concept and to ‘own it’. It could become two groups each with two or three people. MERISTEM means DIVIDE !

If you already have house groups, Meristems may be used as a variation. You could occasionally subdivide into smaller, single-sex groups, with the intention that each small group brings one or two new participants.

Finally, don’t try to ‘go it alone’; work within the church, like this:

Within the church

Though we may share the Word of God at any time, when we do it in the ‘world’ there are great advantages in doing it together, with the church behind

us. Usually when we gather with other members of the church we are, so to speak, ‘in the barracks’. Out in the world, however, we are ‘on the battlefield’!

When we feel alone or weak, we tend to gravitate to the church! Human nature likes the path of least resistance. Subconsciously, we prefer – and take – the easier of two options and stay ‘in the barracks’.

Evangelism, however, happens out ‘on the battlefield’! It brings unwelcome uncertainty: the possibility of rejection, ridicule or disinterest. If an alternative allows us to work hard but to do so within the church which appreciates and affirms us, we will take it.

Thus a church or a denomination can find a tiny proportion of its time being spent on active evangelism, whether by members working alone or in teams and organised events; far more is spent on internal, organisational matters. We need the support of others to put ‘our heads above the parapet’ – to leave the safety and security of our fellowship and go out and fulfil our commission to make Christ known.

This support may be expressed in a variety of ways:

1. Prayer and encouragement, by spouse, friends, house group, etc.
2. Collaboration. A preacher who ties the teaching program on a Sunday into the ‘Meristem’ outreach provides further opportunities:
   a) A focus. The series on Sundays will start and finish on certain dates.
   b) Two-way Feedback. The meristem can pass unanswered questions to the preacher before Sunday. And if the sermons are afterwards put on a church website, whether in text or audio format, anyone in a meristem who does not attend church on a Sunday can access them on-line, so hearing another perspective.
3. Accountability. We Christians are ‘under authority’ (Luke 7:8) of Jesus, and His Word. We have been called to be part of a church. All we do is in His Name and with the authority of His Church, even if it is outside the church organisation. If we encounter something beyond our wisdom, we can ask church leaders for help. We are not in any sense alone!

Conclusion

Where are the people who will respond to the Gospel and how do we engage them?

Looking on the surface it is not possible to tell in whom the Lord is at work. The Lord told Paul in Corinth, '*I have many people in this city'* (Acts 18:10). It wasn't necessarily the people Paul wanted or expected (*'the wind blows where it pleases'* John 3:8), but it was his task to find out who the Lord's people *were.*

Meristems aim to start 'where people are' in society. They then give them time and space to consider the claims of Jesus, in an environment with which they are familiar and comfortable.

Whom should we ask? Unless the Lord directs us specifically, we will not know in whom God is at work till they respond. The 'seed' needs to be cast every-where; it is only when it is received that the nature of the soil comes to light (Luke 8: 5ff). Meristems are a way of 'sowing' the Gospel in a society that has become very difficult to talk to in an on-going sense.

The hope is, if the Lord is at work, over a period of engaging with Him through His Word of perhaps years, a seeker might believe in Jesus.

If that was the case, the hope is that the new believer would overcome their previous cultural hesitations of 'church' and would start joining the gatherings, taking their place among them.

It happened in the early church (Acts 5:13,14). Why not again?

'Meristems' in brief

What? Small, brief, informal church gatherings of between two and four people, meeting once a week.

Why? To grow in our relationship with God.

To build friendships and community in a disintegrating society.

Who? Anyone. Any age, background or stage, from seeker to firm believer; there is benefit if groups are single-sex.

New folks are welcome to come along for a week or two, sit in, and see what is happening. They may participate in any way they wish, though there is no requirement or expectation of it.

When? Anytime that it can be fitted in, without eating in to 'prime time', so *not* evenings, family time, etc. It might be early morning, lunchtime, after work, when shifts coincide, etc.

The gathering lasts for 45 minutes and ***always*** finishes at the previously agreed time. The group runs for about 7 weeks.

Where? Anywhere convenient - Home, office, canteen, church, pub, train.

How? This format gives a good balance of 45 minutes:

1. **Hospitality** (5 mins) Cup of tea, meal, drink etc.
2. **Reading** (2 mins) A passage from a Gospel is read aloud.
3. **Questions** (2 mins) What questions does the passage throw up? *Nobody* offers answers till the questions stop.
4. **Answers** (15 mins) Everyone tries to answer from the passage the questions it has raised, and is then welcome to share their reaction and views on what has been said. (This part can be extended if the group has more than 45 minutes.)
5. **Key Verse, Main Point** (3 mins)
6. **Application** (10 mins) What does it teach about God?
   What should we do?
7. **Sharing** (5 mins) People are invited to speak, in confidence, of any news of what is going on in their family or at their work.
8. **Prayer** (2 min) There is an opportunity, for any who wish it, to pray aloud for any of the concerns that others have expressed.

Divide? When the group grows beyond five, it splits in two.