

Inter Faith Theological Advisory Group paper

**The Language of Love:
Church Growth and Interfaith Relations -
Some Ecumenical Reflections**

Introduction

In 2010 the global Church marked the centenary of the Edinburgh Mission Conference of 1910, which is often regarded as the moment when the ecumenical movement was born. The “Edinburgh 2010 Common Call” was affirmed by representatives of different traditions – Catholic, Evangelical, Orthodox, Pentecostal and Protestant – and stated:

“We believe the Church, as a sign and symbol of the reign of God, is called to witness to Christ today by sharing in God’s mission of love through the transforming power of the Holy Spirit”.

The 1910 conference also acknowledged the presence of other faiths in the context of the Church’s mission to the world, albeit with a view to seek converts and to baptise. Although much has changed in the way some churches and traditions have engaged with people of other faiths, the fundamental question remains:

What does it mean for Christianity to be lived out in a world that is religiously and culturally plural?

In our present context, the phrase “people of all faiths and none” might slip off the tongue all too easily but it accurately describes the context of Western societies: there are people who are religious, because they have a faith and they attend a place of worship; there are those with an occasional or nominal attachment to a faith community; there are people who have a strong sense of spirituality without any religious affiliation; and those that have no religious faith or belief, regarding themselves as solely secular.

This paper is an invitation to a conversation: a conversation about how the Church might engage in mission in the 21st century, in a society and a world that is religiously and culturally plural.

The Five Marks of Mission agreed in 1984 by the Anglican Consultative Council, which subsequently gained wider ecumenical currency, states:

The mission of the Church is the mission of Christ:

1. To proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom.
2. To teach, baptise and nurture new believers.
3. To respond to human need by loving service.
4. To transform unjust structures of society, to challenge violence of every kind and to pursue peace and reconciliation.
5. To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation, and sustain and renew the life of the earth.

How the churches engage with people of other faiths is one of the most important missiological challenges of the 21st century when religious identity features so prominently. Its challenge centres around the implicit tension between the second mark of mission and numbers three, four and five, as they can sometimes seem to be in opposition to one another, especially in an inter-religious context. In many ways these are not new challenges and, whilst they are present whenever the Church engages in mission, they were most pronounced in previous generations when, as Western colonialism ended, former missionaries and those who were the inheritors of the missionary paradigm wrestled with questions of Christian presence amidst religious and cultural diversity. We therefore acknowledge a debt to the contribution they made to our thinking and that they still have important things to say to our present context.

This paper aims to explore some of these challenges. It does not offer recommendations but is an invitation to a deeper ecumenical conversation about Christian mission in our time.

I. The Context

The Inter Faith Theological Advisory Group within Churches Together in Britain and Ireland has been looking at the question of how current priorities of Church growth and evangelism relate to, and intersect with, the place of interfaith relations. Whilst Church leadership stresses that the urgency of evangelism does not mean a backing away from dialogue and good relations with other faith communities, what is often

heard in some faith communities is a de-prioritisation of dialogue, accompanied with a fear that they might be targets for evangelisation. In some communities this fear has historical longevity, with long memories from colonial times, especially with regard to South Asia where many such communities have their origins. This is the background to the belief by many Hindus and Buddhists that dialogue ought to mean an implicit turning away from proselytism. Meanwhile many Jews associate proselytism with centuries of antisemitism. These are not new concerns: they have always been at the heart of Christian discernment about how the Church should relate to people of other faiths. However, the particular nature of the question regarding church growth offers an opportunity to re-examine the questions in light of contemporary trends of ecclesial thinking.

The methodology that we adopted was to host a series of conversations with invited guests who came from different parts of the CTBI family and then to reflect upon what the implications were for the subject matter in hand. These conversations raised important questions about the nature of the Church and its mission, which pointed to an important aspect of inter faith dialogue, that of its missiological purpose. Whilst the missional context of Western society has radically changed from that of 30 years ago, many of the older questions continue to surface, particularly in relation to Christian particularity and its relationship to religious otherness. It is an obvious point, but it is necessary to state it again: theological accounts of religious otherness vary both within Christian denominations as well as between them.

The urgency of Church growth in Britain and Ireland is undeniable, given the levels of decline in what are sometimes referred to as the “mainline churches”. Some commentators have predicted that, based upon current trends of falling away and aging, an alarming number of local churches and chapels will disappear, and denominations which once held significant influence in society will be shadows of their former selves. In some places within the Britain and Ireland context congregations are down to single figures, with a multiplicity of older buildings. Many clergy too are finding their roles changing, with many caring for multiple congregations, and being drawn into maintenance of congregations and buildings at the expense of mission and pastoral care. Meanwhile the effect of the recent COVID-19 Pandemic has pushed many congregations towards fragility and even closure. Who then would carry forward Christian witness in such a context? Who will hold the Christian narrative in a society when denominational structures have crumbled, worshipping congregations have diminished and once proud Church buildings function as carpet warehouses, night clubs or have been converted to luxury flats? Meanwhile, there has been a flourish of independent evangelical and Pentecostal churches including those of migrant communities which, in some communities, has fragmented the Christian presence. Meanwhile during the Pandemic, where

churches have had the means of online streaming of services there are reports of increased engagement which, in and of itself, raises important questions, although these remain outside the scope of this paper.

From the outset it should be noted that whilst this may seem to be a very urgent and relevant issue in the life of the churches in Britain and Ireland, it relates to older, persistent questions about Christianity's alleged exclusivism amid religious plurality and the place of the "Great Commission". Attempts to offer any perspective on these matters must be understood within the context of an ongoing theological debate around matters of salvation, Christian particularity, mission and evangelism, the economy of the Holy Spirit and understanding of the divine/ultimate reality. As an "inter faith theological advisory group" our perspective both arises out of our own dialogical encounters and from a belief that any such perspective is provisional at best. "Provisional" is a key word here, for not only is our own knowledge partial and awaiting completion in God's time (1 Corinthians 13.12) but it is always open to fresh challenge and revision through our dialogical encounter with other Christians, people of other faiths and the world. This is to live in missional and dialogical encounter with the world: to participate in God's mission in the world must surely be provisional in terms of our own human perspectives and deeply held convictions.

Might we go further and say that any perspective on these matters that resists the implication of *provisionality* lacks theological authenticity? We would want to endorse that assertion. The document "In Good Faith: The Four Principles of Interfaith Dialogue", published in 1991 by the Council of Churches in Britain and Ireland, spoke of the "art of sensitive and creative listening", and this seems apt for the way the Church engages with society, whether it be in dialogue or evangelisation.ⁱ

Christianity is an ancient faith that is found in every inhabited continent, and at the present time is growing globally in numerical terms. The astounding growth in parts of Africa and Asia (especially China) can be contrasted with the decline in many of the historic churches found in Europe and North America. Along with other ancient faiths, Christianity draws strength from its scripture and traditions that ought to resist attempts to conform it to one cultural or political understanding. Particularly through membership of the World Council of Churches, but also through participation in worldwide communions, the different denominations in Britain and Ireland have grown accustomed to a unity that is expressed in diversity, where the Gospel is lived out in many and varied ways. These relationships continually challenge us in our Eurocentric world views about the nature of church, mission and liturgy. Meanwhile, closer to home, the ecumenical context in which the churches pursue unity is much more complex and diverse. This complexity has two main facets

– firstly that the British Council of Churches (the predecessor body to CTBI) was largely an intra-Protestant body with a great deal of consensus as to the ecumenical task in the post-war era, whilst CTBI includes the Roman Catholic Church, Orthodox churches and many churches of Pentecostal traditions. The second related fact is that, as a result of migration, Christianity, especially in urban parts of England, has become very diverse, with Christian global experience impacting on the local and a number of churches that are growing numerically.

However, it is the lived reality of many within our group, and of the people that we engage with more widely in our churches, that inter-religious engagement has resulted in growth. This growth has two meanings. Firstly, we are aware that engagement with people of other faiths has brought some to a closer and more committed expression of Christian faith. Secondly, there is the direct experience of having one's faith deepened and enriched by ongoing encounters with people of other faiths.

II. The Conversations

Before highlighting the issues and questions that have emerged from our deliberations, it might be helpful to provide a narrative with regard to the conversations we have had over the past three years that have led us to these questions.

Our starting point was the experience of local churches and parishes in areas where there are significant communities of other faiths. In some cases, the Christian worshipping presence has diminished and therefore the church finds itself wrestling on the one hand with issues of numerical decline and on the other with a developing ministry of hospitality, welcome and of building community. For some the emphasis on evangelism stands over and against an approach that lays emphasis on community and hospitality. However, this dichotomy can be an over-simplification, with the reality manifesting itself within a desire to “keep the show on the road” and some hesitation as to the most faithful way to be a Christian presence in a context of religious plurality. At the same time, it is to be noted that in some places both inter faith work and evangelism have been professionalised, and this is where the dichotomy is often to be found. For example, there are instances where a remunerated officer for inter faith work and another for evangelism might lead to a silo approach to two strands of mission that might so easily be linked to liberal and conservative emphases respectively. The polarising of evangelism versus dialogue may well be exacerbated by the tendency to see professionalization as the route to success in either inter faith engagement or evangelism. This professionalisation is a

wider phenomenon in society. When institutions are in decline, the instinct is to employ their way out of their predicament.

What is common to both evangelism and inter faith engagement is the search for what it means to be Christian in a world of plurality and rapid change, where the institutional Church is struggling to maintain its relevance and voice. Thus, those engaged in work in evangelism and those involved in work within inter faith relations have not always been engaging in the necessary conversations about the issues as they are seen from their perspectives. An important point is that those involved in what might be described as a “special interest area” need to find a language to speak to the wider Church, needing to fully contribute to the conversation as to what it means to be Christian in the world today. In particular, there is a need for those engaged in inter faith engagement to find a language by which to speak to the wider Church, where disquiet may exist when it comes to these issues. This is important because those in multi-faith areas may well be ahead of the curve in terms of ministering within contexts where Christian populations have shrunk. Here “growth” might be viewed in terms of the growth in the relationship between the community and the local church/parish.

All this points to the reality that there is more than one Christian response to the present context. What emerged in one conversation was what Archbishop Justin Welby has spoken of as “good disagreement”, which needs to take place within the intra-Christian arena as well as the presumed area of inter-religious engagement.

Four questions were put to us in our conversation with Church of England colleagues engaged in the Presence and Engagement project:

1. How do we articulate a vision of growth which is appropriate to multi-faith parishes?
2. What unique opportunities for growth do these contexts provide and what challenges?
3. How do we appreciate and engage with the range of theological perspectives found within the Church of England on questions of witness, evangelism and conversion?
4. What might insights from Presence and Engagement parishes contribute to the wider Church’s conversation about growth?

Another angle from the Church of England suggested a deeper reflection upon the recruitment approaches adopted by some new religious movements that might cause churches to reflect that the approach of “making new disciples” might be a radical and significantly different approach: the task of making new disciples is not,

or should not be, a mere recruitment drive. But what is the qualitative difference between the two? Additionally, reflection could take place on how the theology of making new disciples differs from the managerial approach that is bound up in questions of finance and institutional survival: this might be called the “Church growth-money axis”.

Mission theology however raises other questions that are crucial here. In particular, what it means to be a “public Christian”. On a number of occasions, politicians that hold religious faith have spoken of the difficulty they have experienced in speaking publicly about their faith in ways that are viewed positively by the media. The assumption is often that a person who “comes out” as Christian will be intent on “conversion”, or asserting a particular theological agenda. Anecdotal evidence suggests an instinctive association of religion with negative things (conversion, proselytism, prejudice, violence) and “spirituality” as something more individual, private, beneficial and benign. This is an important question for further exploration as it also resonates with the experiences of being “public” about religious matters in the public square for those who belong to other religions. It is important to recognise how people of other faiths have experienced the challenges of being public about their religion: Sikh perspectives as well as Muslim and Jewish are of particular importance here.

What we might wish to affirm is the role Christians have in creating community and being empathetic, by being interactive, and by having some sort of sense of the other person as a human being before God.

Within this conversation emerged another issue that was described as “creating new good news”, that is to say, how is the Gospel of “good news” proclaimed to those for whom the Gospel has become associated with “bad news”? Can the Gospel be proclaimed in new and positive ways? What struck us as significant was the resonance with the experience of other faiths who carry with them overtly negative experiences of their encounters with the Church as in the case of antisemitism (with the Jewish community) and colonialism (other religions, especially Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam and Sikhism), when Christian missionaries, at least in the nineteenth century, often sought to undermine the religions they worked amongst through negative portrayals of their beliefs and practices. Examples of this include the portrayal of Judaism as legalistic and “limited” by law with no stress upon “love”, that Islam is a faith that is rooted in violence and that Hinduism is a religion that is fundamentally idolatrous or rooted in the caste system. These false perceptions diminish Christian witness and can only be overcome by authentic dialogue.

A further issue is the stark juxtaposition between what might be called “short-term Christians” (those that attend their church for a while, motivated by other factors such as church school places) and those occasions when individuals of other faiths might attend Christian worship for any number of reasons. With regard to the latter, examples include a Shia Muslim woman whose connection with Christian worship helped her to reconnect with her Shia Muslim roots and the Jewish man who attended occasional church services because he felt a close, emotional connection to Christianity because he had been saved from the Holocaust through the Kindertransport. How does one quantify “Church growth” in this regard and how should the Church make sense of the “boundaries” that are more porous than often imagined? To put this differently, how is “authenticity” to be measured?

We were however challenged to take seriously the perspectives from Pentecostal/Conservative Evangelical churches who hold the view that the Bible teaches that only through professed faith in Jesus Christ can one be saved. The concerns already mentioned that some faiths fear being targeted for conversion was balanced against the belief in the Christian obligation to evangelise in order to “save the lost”. Here the emphasis is upon a “battle for people’s souls” and upon the Christian character of the UK that must be defended “at all costs”. This strongly held religious conviction does not stem from a de-humanising impulse but rather flows from a recognition that God desires all to come to faith in Jesus Christ. An important part of this are the concerns of some migrant churches whose members have direct experience of living in contexts where Christian religious freedom is curtailed and thus dialogue with faiths such as Hinduism and Islam is viewed as problematic.

Meanwhile a different perspective was offered by a school chaplain and her experience, both in terms of “growth of faith” within the school community and how this relates to wider Church structures. This was most clearly illustrated in the way that children in a school with a Christian ethos, affiliated to one of the larger denominations and with an ordained chaplain, do not figure in Church growth statistics. This suggests that “Church growth” and “growth in faith” are often not the same thing! Thus, it may be that what lies behind much language of “Church growth” is a desire to maintain existing patterns of church life and pastoral ministry. It also may be the case that in the second decade of the 21st century children and young people engage with faith in different ways from previous generations. If this is so, how is this to be quantified? The interactions between young people and chaplains in these contexts are rarely, if ever, counted as having any significance when the churches talk about “Church growth”. She shared with us the ways in which she, in this multi-faith context, spoke about Jesus, the Bible and God. And in this school with a Christian ethos, children are encouraged to explore their own faith: a Jewish boy

learns Hebrew, Muslim children talk about the Qur'an and a Hindu girl takes an appropriate faith symbol to a national place of remembrance.

A Catholic missiologist then took us through some of the crucial Catholic documents that pertain to this area. He described the nature of both Catholic understandings of mission and how they relate to people of other faiths. Especially in a post-Vatican II context, it begins with a sincerity and openness to truth, goodness and beauty, with a willingness to learn from world religions and a working together for justice and peace, together with a willingness to build bridges and to recognise our shared humanity. There also needs to be humility with a recognition that "the spirit moves where it will" and at the same time an acknowledging of the historic failings in the Catholic Church. The fundamental need is to discern how to be faithful to all of Christ's commands, including mission, in all its richness: discerning what is good, true and beautiful. The comprehensive nature of Catholic theology means that it is an all-embracing approach, not either/or but both/and, although there have been many moments in history when this delicate balance has been disrupted. Richard P. McBrien states that "the Church is at once holy and sinful, not in the sense that sin exists alongside grace, but in the sense that even graced existence is ambiguous, fragile and subject to disintegration. The Kingdom of God is neither coextensive with the Church nor totally divorced from the Church".

We then turned to the scope of Vatican II and what it had to say about people of other faiths, as not all of it is found within *Nostra Aetate*, which emphasises respect of other faiths. Firstly, there is the contention in *Lumen Gentium* that "those who have not yet received the Gospel are related in various ways to the people of God". And then in *Gaudium et Spes*

respect and love ought to be extended also to those who think or act differently than we do in social, political and even religious matters. In fact, the more deeply we come to understand their ways of thinking through such courtesy and love, the more easily will we be able to enter into dialogue with them.

Over the years since Vatican II there have been other contributions that are relevant here, including a vision not only for evangelisation but also the evangelization of culture (*Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 1975), a recognition that interreligious dialogue is a part of mission (*Redemptoris Missio*, 1990), a suspicion of relativism (*Dominus Iesus*, 2000) and reflection on living with *de facto* pluralism (*Doing theology in Asia Today*, 2000).

These different perspectives are not of course an exhaustive account of the different theological approaches to mission, but they illustrate that there are many ways of engaging with religious pluralism. That there are differing approaches is an important point that we wish to acknowledge.

III. Risking the Church

These different discussions revealed a significant diversity in theological approaches to the theme of Church growth and evangelism, revealing that there is no one standalone answer to the questions posed at the start of this paper. What is clear is that the Church in our context faces a time of vulnerability and risk. The next stage of our process was to reflect upon the relationship between mission and risk taking and what this might say to us in a religiously plural context. Might we consider “risking the Church for the sake of the Church”?ⁱⁱ So having heard from others, we now listened to one another about the sort of risks that could be taken for the future mission of the Church. What follows in this section is a summary of some of those reflections.

We have already noted that statistics demonstrate that we live in a context in which there is a marked drop in commitment to our churches. Cultural forms of Christian belonging are receding, leading for example, to many families losing their link with the Church. There is also a growth of the Church in some contexts and a shrinking in others, with mega churches, in effect, colonising the minds of some Christians with a prosperity gospel.

In some places it must be noted, some of the church growth strategies leave many people feeling ill at ease, confused as to the theology that lies behind it. It often seems to be driven by pragmatic realities such as the paying of clergy pensions. It also has a tendency to stifle theological creativity. Some of the churches that were growing tended to separate themselves from society and inter faith encounter, yet we are aware that churches have grown that have engaged with the diversity of their local community. Sometimes ‘conversion’ was often about deliverance from something regarded as dangerously ‘other’, about ‘truth as correctness’ and ‘an unpolluted identity’. Drawing on the encounter with eastern religions, the presence of the Christian ego within the drive for conversions, and an exclusivist possession of Jesus, was noted.

Ecclesiological questions are central here, for the Church is the gift of Christ. We considered whether there was a need to risk the institutional Church for the sake of a more-broadly conceived Church. Tribal visions of Church may need to be jettisoned in favour of seeing the Church as present beyond institutions. Equally the Holy Spirit

should be seen as active within western society far beyond the Church. If there was a Church outside the Church, it was clear that there was theological justification for risking the institutional Church for the sake of this larger Church.

Anglican theologian Andrew Shanks speaks of the Kingdom of God as “the solidarity of the shaken”, suggesting that the Church is called to make a “kenotic contribution” to that ‘larger ideal’. It is a ‘larger ideal’, because “the solidarity of the shaken” is indeed bigger than the Church; it is a solidarity of all-comers, all who are shaken out of their respective cultural lies, propaganda and conditioning, and who are being opened up to the awkward fullness of reality and the demand it places on us to be ever more empathetic to those who are different from us, but dominated by the lies. Arising from these reflections were several points for deeper reflection:

1. If *Missio Dei* is concerned with the way in which God works in the world, what aspects of our interreligious engagement might we discern to involve participating in the work of God in the world?
2. Is there a place for drawing upon the apophatic tradition that stresses that which we do not know about God? Might this challenge us to push the boundaries of doctrine and tradition, humbly aware of our fallibility and the need to be engaged with the Other?
3. How might the Church foster a ‘solidarity of the shaken’?
4. What might the marks of “authentic Church” look like? Does the experience of the most vulnerable shed any light on this question? How might we interrogate what we mean by “the Body of Christ” when some communities are marginalised and rendered invisible? Is the Church a collective of individuals seeking to love their neighbour, a community of love, or is it more than this? What does salvation mean in our current ecclesial contexts?
5. Might we imagine the Church not as a sheepfold but a watering place where there is free encounter and no exclusive barriers?
6. Is there space for exploring multiple-religious belonging? We have been challenged by those who have crossed or straggled the boundaries between faiths – what might the church in its approach to mission learn from these and other subaltern voices?
7. We have observed that at the present time the churches are facing challenging times. However what do the Biblical insights from the pruning parables say to us about what might lead to the yielding of abundant fruit? What would abundant fruit look like?

Here are some of the other key ideas that emerged from these reflections:

- The place of identity – the fear that ‘who we are’ might be put at risk if we engage in particular kinds of dialogue and activity. This led us to acknowledge

the power of identity politics in society and how the language of 'identity' is finding its way into Christian discourse. Perspectives from global subaltern, feminist and LGBTQ perspectives are relevant here: taking account of the way in which identity politics has impinged upon people. For some there is both the sense of "double belonging" and "double rejection" that leads to questions about the place of multiple belongings.

- The place of *Missio Dei* in our theology of mission, ie our participation in the mission of God, which is concerned with the renewal of the whole creation and not merely the visible Church.
- The Church as a community of love, characterised by the cataphatic-apophatic dynamic: love can be articulated to a point, ultimately there is a limit to these definitions. This might lead Christians to be less inclined to absolute and unshakable answers to questions and more genuinely open and receptive.
- "Risking the Church" might involve the risk of pruning back significantly in order to render sweeter and more numerous fruit.
- What constitutes "real" or "authentic" Church? There can be a real tension between grassroots, Church organisations and what constitutes "real" Church, with expectations that a local church/parish will conform to existing patterns and expectations.

IV. Emerging Issues

Evangelism

Evangelism is clearly a central issue and there will be different definitions and understandings. What is closely connected to evangelism is "faithfulness", as Christians are called to proclaim the Gospel. But what is "faithfulness" when it comes to Christian witness in a multi-religious context? There are sometimes instances when people of other faiths have a negative experience of Christian evangelism. We would wish to affirm the words of Archbishop Justin Welby when he states:

When we make our evangelism a product in a marketplace or an expression of cultural superiority, then we are falling short of the message given to us. In fact we are blaspheming and denying it. Indeed, it is possible to embark upon evangelism in a way that denies and even contradicts the very one we proclaim. If it is free and undeserved, then there should be no place for coercion, for imperialistic ambition, for bait-and-switch techniques that buy people into the Church. Those practices are decidedly Bad News!ⁱⁱⁱ

Archbishop Justin stresses that "good news" must be characterised by love, gentleness, respect and compassion, commending a process of empathy that might

shape approaches to evangelism, noting that often Christians, when speaking of other faiths, compare them unfavourably to Christian belief. This might be heard to echo the words of Pope John Paul II when he spoke of dialogue being the new name of love.

We would therefore like to suggest that, rather than viewing “evangelism” and “dialogue” as in opposition to one another, it is through our deeper engagement with people of other faiths that the authenticity and integrity of our approach to mission is tested, and that “dialogue” is indeed the language and praxis of love that reflects God’s deep love for the world that the Church is called to manifest.

Conversion

“Church Growth” carries with it an implication (not so hidden) that there are those, currently not part of the Church, who, it is hoped, will “convert” to Christianity and be part of the Church. Who are those that will be converted? Are there particular groups that might be “targeted”? How should converts from another religion to Christianity be cared for and supported? What impact does this have on interfaith relations?

Conversion from one religion to one another can be a sensitive and often controversial issue in interreligious dialogue. The notion that “dialogue” is a cover for furtive proselytism is a charge that is often made against Muslims as well as Christians, and why understanding dialogue as a means of proselytisation is often frowned upon. Western Christianity has of course a history with which to contend: Western (especially British) missionary activity overseas often went hand in hand with colonialism and many in our churches are formed by an understanding of mission where military power and the preaching of the Gospel went together. Many of the mission agencies who were part of this history have attempted to redefine what mission is for them, and often use the language of “partnership” so as to divest themselves of colonial power dynamics. Are their important lessons that we can learn from some of these mission agencies?

Yet at the same time there is the need to affirm a basic human right, that of the freedom to change one’s religion.

We might identify different facets of “conversion”:

1. The person who changes from one religion to another: they have left their old faith behind and embraced a new one. They may view the faith they left in negative terms.

2. Those who embrace another faith tradition but do not consider that they have left their original faith, thus they seek to belong to two traditions.
3. Then there are those who embark upon a journey of close encounter with another faith, only to discover a deeper reality of their own faith tradition.
4. But then there is another facet of the word “conversion” where one changes not their religion but one’s *perception and encounter* of another faith in a profound and positive way. One of our group referred to this as “being converted to the beauty of the other”, whilst remaining firmly rooted in their Christian faith.

All of these involve a level of conversion and personal transformation that is relevant to how Church growth is understood.

Commodification

We wrestled with numerous aspects of the underlying difficulty with agendas for Church growth. The need to “brand” churches or initiatives is prevalent at present and is found in liberal as well as conservative churches and movements. The assumption can sometimes be that there is a “Christian market” that can be tapped into, with the belief that if the branding is effective then Church growth will be the end result. We would want to raise a concern that this holds a danger of the commodification of the Gospel, which carries with it assumptions about the human person within a capitalist society. Careful reflection is needed here about the place of grace and the Holy Spirit.

Christian presence

An important area when it comes to mission and multi-religious communities is the place and role of Christian presence. The Church of England has perhaps done most in recognising that, where the Church is found in communities where another faith is much stronger, there is a vital need to maintain a Christian presence. This is to take the witness of the Gospel into places that are outside the comfort zone of the institutional Church.

But “Christian presence” as a witness to the world is not merely about Church buildings and congregations existing in religiously plural communities. Chaplaincy provides a vital role in this respect, which may or may not yield the desired results from the standpoint of a Church growth strategy. However, there is also the need to make space for voices that often go unheard – these are the subaltern voices. Such voices, we suggest, might tell us that size of church might be relevant/irrelevant in relation to us being Christ in the world.

Ecumenical and Dialogical Considerations

Our investigations around this theme have revealed a remarkable diversity across the member churches of CTBI. There is no one definition of mission, no one definition of what constitutes “Church” and no one view of how to engage with questions of salvation. The extent of the diversity could even lead one to ask whether, if the goal of “visible unity” is the destination, the boat of the ecumenical movement is on diversion! Often “mission” is frequently stated as the priority for ecumenical strategy, yet what we have found is that there is a lack of coherence as to what is meant by “mission” and often differing and contradictory views as to how the Church should engage with the world, implicit in which is how to engage with “otherness” (religious or otherwise). This has led us to make two points: the first is the need to dialogue around what is meant by “mission” and “salvation”; and the second is a greater openness within interreligious dialogue about the diversity of Christian understanding when it comes to mission. This would help address some of the concerns held in other faith communities.

Participating in God’s Mission

In this section we summarise some of the overarching themes that have emerged in our discussions. Fundamentally we would want to emphasise an important understanding of mission (of which dialogue and action with people of other faiths is a part), namely that the Church is participating in the mission of God (*Missio Dei*). The concept of *Missio Dei* was a twentieth century reaction against post-enlightenment trends in theology that stressed human endeavour. *Missio Dei* stresses the actions of God in the world rather than the activity and initiative of human beings. However, it can sometimes seem that “Church growth”, narrowly focused upon numbers attending Sunday worship, is gaining ground over *Missio Dei*. This means that there is a polarity between scarcity verses abundance, an idolising of “growth” over “quality”, a competitiveness between churches and even the danger that hope becomes overwhelmed by a panic over institutional fragility. Yet at the same time the research undertaken by the Global Mission Network within Churches Together in Britain and Ireland in 2010 expressed a note of caution about the potential misuse of *Missio Dei*: in the words of John V. Taylor a “gloriously inclusive term” with “an inherent, if not deliberate vagueness in the term ‘mission of God’ which lays it open to abuse. It can be made to include anything under the sun that anyone considers a Good Thing.”^{iv}

With this note of caution, we would want to encourage a deeper reflection as to whether our fuller participation in God’s mission might reveal that God is doing a

new thing in the world, and that the apparent death of ecclesial institutions will enable a new thing to be born. This might lead us into a different kind of Christian mission in the world that is open to find the mystery of God, and the incarnational reality of our faith in those subaltern voices that are found in the unexpected places, and, yes, those places might also include people of other faiths.

V. Conclusion

At the outset of this paper we stated this was an invitation to a conversation about how Christian witness is to be exercised in a religiously plural context. What has become apparent through a long process of consultation and listening has been the diversity that exists within Christianity in these islands and those that speak “a Christian point of view” have fallen into a spiritual failure of ecumenical imagination. What this exercise has taught us is the need for humble listening to one another. On the one hand we have what we already knew from the outset, namely that other faith communities’ concerns about Church growth and evangelism need to be heard, especially considering the part the churches have played in colonial vandalism of other cultures. But on the other hand, we are acutely aware that for those committed to interfaith relations, there is the need to listen to the diversity of Christian theological conviction, within which are those for whom the particularity of Christian theology is essential if the Gospel is to be proclaimed to the world. Meanwhile, for those unfamiliar with inter-religious dialogue, there is the need to answer important questions as to whom the Gospel of love is to be proclaimed in a way that does not turn “good news” into “bad news” that is feared or avoided.

VI. Resources

There are a number of resources that have been produced by ecumenical and interfaith bodies that attempt to address some of the issues raised in this paper. These include:

Ethical Guidelines for Christian and Muslim Witness in Britain (Christian-Muslim Forum, <https://wordpress.christianmuslimforum.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/CMF-Ethical-Guidelines-for-Christian-and-Muslim-Witness-in-Britain.pdf>)

‘Striving Together in Dialogue’ (WCC, Muslims and Christians, the Netherlands, 2000) <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/striving-together-in-dialogue>

‘Joint declaration on the freedom of religion and the right to conversion’, Islamic Council of Norway/Church of Norway Council on Ecumenical and International Relations 2007 <https://www.trooglivssyn.no/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Joint-declaration-on-the-freedom-of-religion-and-the-right-to-conversion.pdf>

‘Building Good Relations with People of Other Faiths and Beliefs’ (Inter Faith Network, IFN, **1993**).

<https://www.interfaith.org.uk/resources/building-good-relations-with-people-of-different-faiths-and-beliefs>

‘Report from inter-religious consultation on “Conversion – assessing the reality”’ (WCC, other faiths **2006**) <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/report-from-inter-religious-consultation-on-conversion>

‘Ecumenical considerations for dialogue and relations with people of other religions’ (WCC, **2004**)

<https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/ecumenical-considerations-for-dialogue-and-relations-with-people-of-other-religions>

‘Generous Love: the truth of the Gospel and the call to dialogue, an Anglican theology of inter faith relations’, 2008

https://nifcon.anglicancommunion.org/media/18910/generous_love_a4_with_foreward.pdf

‘Meeting God in Friend and Stranger’, (Catholic Bishops Conference of England and Wales, **2010**),

<https://www.cbcew.org.uk/meeting-god-in-friend-and-stranger/>

ⁱ In Good Faith: The Four Principles of Interfaith Dialogue, A Brief Guide for the Churches, Council of Churches for Britain and Ireland, 1991, p.ix

ⁱⁱ The title “Risking the Church” is borrowed from M.M.Thomas’ book Risking Christ for Christ’s Sake, Geneva: WCC, 1987

ⁱⁱⁱ Archbishop Justin Welby’s Deo Gloria Trust lecture on Evangelism and Other Faiths:

<https://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/speaking-and-writing/speeches/archbishop-justin-welbys-deo-gloria-trust-lecture-evangelism-and>

^{iv} A.Richards, J.Clark, M.Lee, P.Knights, J.Price, P/Rolph, N.Rooms, Foundations for Mission: A Study of language, theology and praxis from the UK and Ireland perspective, Churches Together in Britain and Ireland, 2010, pp.53-55