

Breaking the mould of Christendom: Kingdom community, diaconal church and the liberation of the laity

Deacon Dr David Clark was in Methodist presbyteral ministry until 2005 when he entered the Methodist Diaconal Order. Previously he has lectured at Westhill College, Birmingham, in community education. He has been involved in and written about many ventures concerned with the renewal of the church. He currently serves in the Sheffield District of the Methodist Church. His book *Breaking the Mould of Christendom*, from which this article is drawn, was published by Epworth Press in November 2005. The article initially appeared in the 'Harborne Papers' series.

Community or chaos?

For the first time in history humankind faces a stark choice between survival and annihilation. Weapons of mass destruction, international terrorism, conflicts over tackling global warming and ecological exhaustion, and the increasing polarization of wealth and poverty, pose the question of whether a new millennium will bring community or chaos.

The reality is that if our planet, with all its riches and in all its beauty, is to carry us through another millennium, then it has to become a global community of communities. As Parker Palmer, a Quaker, puts it: 'Community means more than the comfort of souls. It means, and has always meant, the survival of the species.' But what is this thing called 'community'?

What is community?

'Community', like a bar of soap in the shower, is a very slippery concept. It has been so overused that it has become all things to all people, and can thus mean little to anyone. Yet, as Parker Palmer has reminded us, without it we perish.

The truth is that we only become aware of the power of community when we define it in terms of human experience, and not least human feelings. For community is about more than the place where we live (a suburban 'community'), common interests (a professional 'community') or even relationships (an extended family 'community'). Community is at its most potent where deep feelings are involved; that is where people experience *a sense of community*.

Sociologists have identified three key aspects of community as feeling. They have called these a sense of security (feeling physically secure and 'at home'), a sense of significance (feeling that we are valued) and a sense of solidarity (feeling that we belong). Such feelings are essential for human flourishing. But we have a problem. Such feelings are evident not only within the family, the school or the neighbourhood, but amongst

members of the mafia and al-Qaida. So we need to bring more than feelings into the frame.

The kingdom community

For the power of community to be used in a creative way, values and beliefs have to come to the fore. It is here that the Christian image of the kingdom has a unique contribution to make. For the kingdom, as Christ describes it, is a community of people dedicated to do the will of God 'on earth as in heaven'. It is a *kingdom community*.

The kingdom community takes our understanding of community far beyond where the sociologists leave us. Its members experience not only a sense of security, but the gift of life, and life in all its fulness, offered by God the Creator. They experience not just a sense of significance, but the gift of liberation, offered by Christ the Liberator. They are bonded not just by a sense of solidarity, but by the gift of love, bestowed by the Holy Spirit the Unifier. What is more, these are universal gifts offered to all who 'seek first the kingdom of God'. The kingdom community is a learning community engaged on a journey of spiritual discovery.

For the kingdom community to be made a reality, a form of leadership, exemplified by Christ himself, is needed that will catalyze, enable and resource men and women to discern and respond to God's gifts of life, liberation, love and learning.

The kingdom community is the epitome of what God wants all communities, sacred and secular, to be like. Whether we are talking about families, neighbourhoods, cities or nations, the kingdom community is both model and gift offered by God to aid us in building a world that is a community of learning communities.

The diaconal church

If the task before us is to build a global community of communities, we will need a church that is the servant of the kingdom community to help accomplish it. We call such a church a 'diaconal church' (the word *diakonos* in the New Testament means 'servant'). The problem is that this is rarely how the church has seen its role throughout the long centuries of Christendom. And even though the power of Christendom is declining, the church remains moulded by its legacy. As a result, it is unable to become the servant of the kingdom community, to bear witness to God's gifts of life, liberation, love and learning. Thus it is unable to fulfil its calling to build community and do away with chaos.

There are many features of Christendom that still mould and constrain the life of the church. Amongst these are 'imperialism' (the church seeking pre-eminence over other institutions); 'clericalism' (the clergy taking centre-stage); 'legalism' (the veneration of the status quo); 'didacticism' (instruction not discussion as the educational norm); 'elitism' (a hierarchical form of leadership); 'paternalism' (male domination) and 'statism' (the church 'established' as a privileged institution). All these, and other

features of Christendom, leave the church ill-equipped to serve the kingdom community in today's world.

Hope for the future?

So how can the mould of Christendom be broken and a diaconal church come into being?

There are numerous ways in which the church worldwide is seeking to renew its life and equip itself for mission. Basic ecclesial communities in Latin America blazed a trail in the 1960s. Pentecostalism is a growing force on the world scene. The Christian Right in the United States has changed the face of American politics. Many evangelical workplace associations are helping lay people see their working lives as a means of Christian witness. And 'fresh expressions of church' are pioneering new forms of gathered congregation.

All these movements of 'renewal' have their strengths. Yet most remain clones of Christendom and are unlikely to become forerunners of a diaconal church. Above all, they fail to model a church in which lay people are equipped to be servants of the kingdom community.

The liberation of the laity

To bring a diaconal church into being, lay people must be freed from the mould of Christendom and liberated to fulfil their calling as the people of God in the world. Only the laity are numerically strong, diverse and dispersed enough to undertake this ministry. How can this Copernican shift in priorities and practice be brought about?

It is unlikely to occur from the 'top' down in a church where clericalism still rules. It is unlikely to occur from the 'bottom' up in a church where that laity still remain, as Mark Gibbs once called them, 'God's frozen people'. Such a paradigm shift can only happen if a new kind of church leader emerges, one ready and trained to stir and equip the laity to be the church dispersed throughout the whole of society. This new kind of church leader we call a 'deacon'. Not, as in the past, one engaged largely in 'works of mercy', but as a 'minister' with an explicit calling to equip the laity to be the people of God in the world.

A renewed diaconate of this kind will come from the ranks of those we currently call deacons. But there are many other 'deacons' beyond the diaconate, be they presbyters or lay people employed by the church who currently undertake a diaconal ministry, even if they do not recognize it as such. It is to this new cohort of servant leaders that we must look if the mould of Christendom is to be broken, the laity freed to fulfil their calling as the servants of the kingdom community and a diaconal church come into being. Without this, Christians will have precious little to offer to a world that now faces a life-or-death choice between community and chaos.

Questions for discussion

1. Is 'community' just another buzz-word, or that on which 'the survival of the species' depends?
2. Are you attracted or put off by the idea of the 'kingdom community'? What does this book's definition of the term 'kingdom community' (embodying the gifts of life, liberation, love and learning) add to, or take away from, your understanding of 'the kingdom of God'?
3. What distinguishes a diaconal from a Christendom form church?
4. How can a diaconal church equip lay people to become the servants of the kingdom community in the world?
5. Is *your* church a diaconal church? How might it become more diaconal?