

This report was first published in the Evangelical Alliance's magazine, *idea*. It summarises reactions from Christian leaders to the 2003 essay, *Imagine: How we can reach the UK*, and the challenge of making whole-life followers of Jesus.



Imagine, an essay by Mark Greene, executive director of LICC, published in *idea* magazine in March 2003, was about a possibility ... what might happen if we really believed in God's power to transform lives, if we learnt together how to be channels of lavish blessing to our fellow citizens, wherever we meet them. We have, Mark argued, the people to show and share the Gospel with our nation.

But we have failed to envision, train, support and resource them for a life of mission in today's UK. We have failed to focus where Jesus focused - on making whole-life disciples rather than simply making converts.

Over the last few months LICC and the Evangelical Alliance have been in consultation with groups of Christian leaders to hear their reactions to *Imagine: How we can reach the UK*. Around 140 leaders have been involved - pastors of larger and smaller churches, evangelists, prayer network leaders, denominational leaders, large conference organisers, those involved in theological education, in workplace ministries, in disciple making ministries. These consultations were part of an on-going process which the EA and LICC hope will not only stimulate thinking about the issue of contemporary disciple making but will also lead to new initiatives, shared resources and a re-energising of approaches to equipping the church to show and share Jesus. So what did these leaders have to say...?

Articulating a need

There was undoubtedly a consensus amongst leaders that we are not as effective as we should be in equipping God's people for today's world. As one denominational leader expressed it,

'It's as if we have sent out this infantry into the world, asking them to take territories, yet without providing them with the right kit, back-up and air cover.'

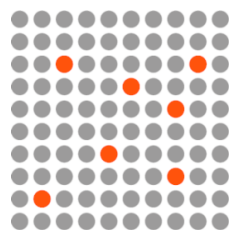
As a consequence, large numbers of 'ordinary' Christians have stopped believing that they are part of God's solution for the world. According to one evangelist, people expect an experience of God in church - but not in the workplace. But, as they went on to say, if people don't know how to communicate something of how a relationship with him is impacting their daily lives, then mission is compromised.

'My hunch', said one evangelist, 'is that this is the biggest problem facing the church - the stunted growth of Christians.'

And as another commented, we need to be clear about just what we are converting people to. It's not only about entering the kingdom of God, but it's also about the potential for Christians to transform the world in which they live.

Throughout the consultations there was a sense that the *Imagine 1* had articulated the need for whole-life Christianity in a way that resonated with these leaders' own observations, experiences and challenges.

Too often, they agreed, Christians and their leaders viewed themselves only as the church gathered, as an increasingly marginalised group living with a ghetto mind-set.



The reality, of course, is that God's people are actually living and relating out there in 'the world'. They're not only the church 'gathered' but also the church 'scattered', operating in networks of relationships in workplaces, institutions, communities and homes around the UK. But they need to be equipped to operate there effectively.

As one leader of a theological college commented, it's not rocket science. The needs Christians express are very basic really. It's about help to live as spouses, parents, employees and so on in an authentic and Christian way, how to apply the Bible and discern God's guidance, to be supported where God has called them.

Committed to His Church

As Prayer Network Leaders reminded us, God remains deeply committed to seeing His church mature, able to show and share the Gospel in this generation. One workplace minister put it like this,

'it's not about being a salesman for a lifestyle choice, it's about being the best expression of how God has created us.'

To become that expression of God's creativity, to be human after the model of Christ, is the heart of what it means to be His follower.

Yet we seem to be struggling to work out how to help each other on that journey. In the opinion of a leader in one of the theological colleges, we have to face the issue that models of discipleship developed in Christendom do not work in a post-Christendom context, the context that we find ourselves in today.

We need to re-look at the kinds of relationship we are developing in our faith communities; the ways we seek to guard our hearts (Prov 4:23) and renew our minds (Rom 12:2); the faith skills and experiences we need to develop together in order to help each other live faithfully and in line with Christ's agenda for His people and His world.

And in this we face some challenges.

Cope not conquer

'In two churches I've tried to do something', commented one pastor, 'In both churches it was greeted with absolute horror. I just wonder if there are lots of Christians who want to keep the sacred-secular divide, who want to put safety boxes around areas of their lives.'

Compartmentalisation was a strategy that many Christians had consciously or unconsciously adopted to deal with the challenges and fears of contemporary society. Pastors, evangelists, denominational leaders all had experience of people who liked the security of being pastored, and who did not really want to 'get out into the world'. Church was a place to help them cope, not help them conquer. Most leaders had experience of trying to encourage people whose confidence in the gospel was low, or who seemed to have lost sight of the eternal issues, whose passion for the on-going work of the Holy Spirit seemed to have waned.

Pastors need resourcing

The demands on pastors can also lead to them experiencing levels of fatigue and discouragement that mitigate against change. Expectations of pastors can be unrealistic - the 5th Emergency Service, commented one leader. And as one evangelist observed, pastors are vulnerable to high levels of guilt. The more they feel they have to deliver, the worse their experience of guilt when they don't. 'I just don't know what to do', said one pastor, 'how can I make a difference?' To add to those demands by asking pastors to re-look at the ways in which they could better make disciples is unrealistic, unless they themselves are resourced, equipped and supported to effect the changes that might be required.

Potential problem

Pastors themselves were also seen by some other leaders as a bottleneck to change. For example, they can be dominated by the need to 'keep the show on the road', especially focusing on Sundays. Furthermore, their leadership training may not necessarily have helped them to know how to set a direction towards whole-life Christian living, and align their resources accordingly, how to envision and equip their churches for disciple-making. Indeed, remarked some Christian leaders, it does not always follow that a good pastor is a good leader. Even in some of the newer churches which often have a culture that is focused more on leadership than on pastoring, the result can sometimes be involving people in more projects and programmes rather than in helping them grow as disciples.

Programme driven

Many leaders commented on how easy it was to become programme driven rather than mission driven. More often than not church programmes were not oriented towards the whole of life, but inadvertently perpetuated a sacred-secular divide. For the prayer network leaders this was a particularly significant issue. They had a growing sense that we have looked for security in church structures, programmes, plans and vision statements, neglecting the transforming power of the Spirit of Jesus Christ engaged in the lives of 'ordinary' Christians; people who carry the presence of God into their daily contexts.

'It's not about being a salesman for a lifestyle choice, it's about being the best expression of how God has created us.'

Workplace minister

Positive experiences

Despite the significant issues that these Christian leaders articulated, there were, throughout the consultations, good examples of how people and churches had sought to work together to connect their faith to their whole lives. Several pastors were spending time with small numbers of individuals in mentoring relationships. One church had started a new convert programme with the aim of better equipping Christians to minister to their families and the wider networks to which they belonged, to help them link the Word of God to their experiences.

Other churches had consciously attempted to take a rest from frenzied activity, to allow time to nurture other relationships. There was good news too, from amongst the denominations, of initiatives that would facilitate a more outward looking mind-set.

From the Prayer Network leaders there was evidence of how God was moving people on through the development of the 24/7 movement, boiler rooms, neighbourhood praying, prayers schools and training. And prayer triplets were often a source of great encouragement.

On the work front there were stories of small groups of working people meeting to support one another. Some pastors were trying to spend time in the workplaces of their church members, not only to encourage them, but also to inform their preaching and their pastoral care. Various churches had experimented with different ways of connecting the Word and the world, for example through a monthly seminar tackling some of today's issues. Another church was using the medium of contemporary film to explore what it means to be a disciple in our culture.

Towards disciple making communities

The *Imagine 1* consultation process has challenged our thinking, yet again, about being church. About becoming churches who live according to a 'train and release' strategy rather than one of 'convert and retain'. About seeing discipleship and evangelism on the same continuum, and discipleship all wrapped up in God's plan for the salvation of the whole world.

Just as missionary agencies seek to train, equip, resource and support their people for lives of mission overseas, so disciple making communities need to do likewise for Christians living in a dramatically changing UK, where their daily experience is that of foreigners and aliens. Such communities need to orientate themselves to the postmodern, post Christendom, multi-cultural context in which they live. They need to be able to grasp and articulate the Gospel for their generation. And they need the relationships, teaching, examples and worshipping communities that can help them know Christ, live holistically as His disciples, and reframe that experience for those to whom they are witnesses.

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Evangelist

Leadership is crucial

The question of leadership is crucial. Not only in terms of leadership skills, but also in being clear as to what leadership is aiming for. The consultation groups agreed that it was urgent to address the issue of training leaders who can lead missional communities, who can envision and equip believers to grow as effective followers of Jesus in their daily contexts. There were several references to the need to engage more deeply with the five-fold pattern of Ephesians 4. And leaders must increasingly seek to model what

they preach in the area of disciple making, recognising the need to invest in a few individuals over a period of time. For the measures of achievement cannot primarily be numerical growth, but the extent to which our communities are growing reflective practitioners of the Christian faith, who are able to connect their faith to all aspects of their world, and so make a difference where God has called them.

The shape of a disciple making community

Out of this consultation process has come the need to identify the shape of disciple making communities. There will be certain distinctive features of the relationships within such communities, and in the priorities and values they adopt. They will have approaches to understanding God's agenda, nurturing a relationship with Jesus, orientating themselves to the context of 21st century UK, dealing with the pressures of contemporary life, developing confidence in the gospel and in the holistic nature of God's salvation for the world, and so on. They will learn together how to articulate the gospel for this generation, how to reframe their experience of God in such a way that it speaks to the needs of our contemporary world.

One of the exciting results of a process such as the *Imagine 1* consultations is the realisation that God is at work in many ways and with many different people. But because of the nature of Christian communities our appreciation of what He is doing and the wisdom and resources that have been developed is fragmented. As these leaders pointed out, there is surely an opportunity to develop a more cohesive conversation around this need to develop disciple making communities; to collaborate in thinking and in acting to develop a mind-set, wisdom and faith tool-kit that are available for communities to adapt their own contexts. Indeed, imagine if we did just that ...

“Reflecting on how men and women become followers and then disciples of Jesus Christ in our post-Christian and post-Christendom society are among the most potentially significant issues facing Christianity in the west today.”

Leader,
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