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Models of mission in Church of England baptism services

Baptismal liturgies and practice have developed over time in the Church of England though recent changes have not been seriously examined. Phillip Tovey here traces three different mission models found in Anglican initiation services – various biological growth models, transfer growth models and conversion models. He argues that the latest services in *Common Worship* set mission, particularly to adults, at the heart of the initiation services and explores some of the practical implications for parish ministry if we take this reconnecting of baptism with mission seriously.

The initiation liturgy of the Church of England has changed its focal point, but this has happened almost unnoticed. There is a refocusing on mission to adults, which is to be welcomed.

Common Worship: Christian Initiation (2006), that is, the second edition of the initiation services,¹ includes much material which sets mission at its heart and so is a welcome departure from the pastoral focus of previous Church of England rites. Indeed I want to suggest that the history of the Church of England baptismal rites can be viewed as an oscillation between various models of mission, sometimes exhibiting a number of different models at the same time. I will therefore begin with a review of the mission models in earlier services but then I want to develop the proposition that *Common Worship: Christian Initiation* (2006) has a strong mission model, particularly in relation to adults. This idea and its implications require some elaboration, and some discernment in the way we read the book. The renewed focus on mission is one to be welcomed by evangelicals and implemented in parish outreach.

Biological growth models

The baptism services in the 1549 and 1552 *Book of Common Prayer* are for infant candidates. The medieval services had their origins in the patristic rites of adult baptism (with children included as families converted). In the initial waves of mission of the early medieval period, baptism was of adults and families and then of whole tribes converting to Christ (often following their king). This original situation was quickly replaced with a new period in which children were the primary candidates, as all the adults of the tribe had now been baptised. For a Christian

¹ Church of England 2006. The first edition was published as *Initiation Services* (Church of England 1998).

society the major mission focus was on *biological growth*. This continued to be the focus through the medieval period. Thus, while the texts addressed the candidates as adults, the context meant that in practice they were all children. The Reformers, including Archbishop Cranmer, translated and adapted the Latin services to fit this context in which children were the only candidates. In so doing, they wrote only services of infant baptism. There were no services of adult baptism because there simply were no candidates.

A strong Augustinian theology of the necessity of baptism for the forgiveness of sins (including original sin), and a doctrine of election that saw the sacrament being effectual in the lives of the predestined, underpinned their approach. It was Anabaptism, the more radical reformation which produced Mennonites, Hutterites and later Baptists, that began to question the suitability of infant candidates and stressed the need for a profession of faith by those baptised.² Thus a 'gathered church' model increasingly challenged the 'mixed national church' model. The latter was a Christendom model, which assumes a context in which all are Christians, the culture is Christian, and where mission is to children for the continuation of the Christian nation. This has continued to be a major strand in the baptismal thinking of the Church of England, not least in the thought of those who advocated 'open baptism' policies (i.e. baptising the children of any who asked for it, despite their lack of active involvement in the church) in the baptismal debates of the last century.³

The way that this 'mixed national church' model of baptism has been applied has varied in the history of the Church of England. Jagger shows that there was a Victorian push for pastoral mission through the sacraments.⁴ Thus the clergy pressed for lay people to get both baptised and confirmed. Bishops changed their policies, visiting more parishes and holding confirmation services locally, where previously the dominant pattern had been mass confirmations in cathedrals of thousands of people, or even of small groups who stopped the bishop as he passed through the village on his horse! However, Jagger shows that this local confirmation approach did not lead to increased numbers of Easter communicants in the same proportion as those baptised and confirmed. This Victorian model still has residual strength in some parts of the country. However, the declining numbers of those baptised compared to live births indicates the waning of this sacramental mission model.⁵

Three further issues are connected to Church of England models. The first issue is the language of baptism as one of the 'occasional offices'. This older terminology called baptism, weddings, and funerals 'occasional offices'. They were seen as pastoral rites that the clergy perform in light of the pastoral needs arising from births, marriages and deaths. Thus baptism is seen as a pastoral response, in a Christian nation, to the birth of a child. But this is to undermine the particular place of baptism, which stands on a different footing from weddings and funerals, being one of the dominical sacraments.

The second issue is the later way of looking at baptism through the 'rites of passage model' developed by the anthropologist van Gennep. This model overlaps with the 'occasional office' model but is more secular in origin. Here baptism is

² See Armour 1998, first published in 1966.

³ See Dalby 1989 and Grey 1993.

⁴ Jagger 1982.

⁵ See Church Statistics at <http://www.cofe.anglican.org/info/statistics/> (accessed 02/08).

seen as a 'birth-related' 'rite of passage'. Baptism was our English way of celebrating the birth of a child. This is another dangerous misconception. This is not to say that baptism is not a 'rite of passage', but to see it as a 'birth-rite' on a purely biological level is potentially to remove from the sacrament any redemptive element. While we do celebrate God's creation in the birth of children, baptism is primarily about new life in the redemption of Christ (Rom. 6, Titus 3). It can be seen as a 'rite of passage' from this world to the kingdom of God, from unbelief to Christian faith, from darkness to light. If so, it is a 'rite of passage' not based on age, but on faith and for people of all ages. Anyone can enter the kingdom through baptism and profession of faith in Christ. As such it is a rite of birth, but not of biological birth, rather of spiritual birth; the people of God are no longer confined to any one nation. Thus the 'birth-rite' model can also undermine the redemptive nature of the sacrament.

The third issue concerns the service of Thanksgiving for the Gift of a Child (or Thanksgiving for the Birth of a Child, as it was in the Alternative Service Book). This was introduced in part to be an alternative to the Prayer Book service of 'Thanksgiving of Women after Childbirth, commonly called the Churching of Women'. The undertones in the Churching service of purification from childbirth were passé in modernist eyes. There was also concern in some parts of the church about 'indiscriminate' baptism. Some felt that the Thanksgiving for the Gift of a Child liturgy was an alternative that could be offered either before, or instead of, infant baptism. In the Church of England the Thanksgiving service enjoyed a growth in use until 2004, since when numbers have been declining slightly.

An alternative way of looking at children (of believing parents) might have been an infant catechumenate, but Anglicans have been reluctant to talk in this way. Infant catechumens occurred in the early church (for instance, Augustine was admitted to the catechumenate as a child and baptised as an adult). The Roman Catholic Church has had some discussions of the idea of an infant catechumenate. Eventually, however, the idea was deemed unhelpful as it seemed to conflict with the practice of infant baptism.

In the ASB, Thanksgiving for the Birth of a Child was the first service in the section of Initiation Services. This seemed to give it a status, or at least a role, alongside baptism and confirmation. In Common Worship it occurs in three places: the Main Volume, the Christian Initiation volume and the Pastoral Services volume. In the former two volumes it is placed before baptism, but in *Common Worship: Pastoral Services* it comprises a section of its own. Thus, Common Worship continues the notion that it can be linked to initiatory activity, but also recognises its potential as a pastoral rite, not deriving its meaning, or *raison d'être*, from Christian initiation alone. It might then exist as a more pastoral rite for those who wonder at the birth of a child but as yet have no initiatory intention.

The theology of any pre-baptismal services is particularly problematical. Anabaptists who stress 'believe and be baptised' in that order have often developed rites of infant dedication or blessing. The theological rationale for this has problems.⁶ Anglicans who use a 'Thanksgiving' service as a preliminary to baptism may find similar problems. However, it may be that the growth of this service has

6 See Tovey 1995.



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been indirectly connected with a growth of adult baptism, suggesting a new attitude in which adult baptism was seen as most desirable.

Mission focused on 'biological growth' also connects to confirmation. Those who are baptised as infants clearly need to express their faith in an adult way. A missiological perspective gives confirmation a more clear function than working from a doctrinal perspective on its meaning. In other words, when you ask about the theological meaning of confirmation, you may end up with many answers (or even questions), but if you ask its function in biological mission, then it clearly functions as a pastoral rite of profession of faith.⁷ Thus the services of Thanksgiving, infant Baptism and Confirmation can all be seen to have a significant position in the biological growth of the church.

Transfer growth models

Compared to the variety of biological growth models, there are fewer transfer growth models in Church of England initiation services. Perhaps part of the history of the Church of England as the established church is about being the 'default' church, the church which people leave to set up their own churches, rather than a church that people join *from* some other church. Nonetheless, the *Book of Common Prayer* 1662 reasserted the previous requirement that those baptised must be confirmed by the bishop before they be admitted to Holy Communion. As such it rejected the confirmations performed by presbyters in the Commonwealth period. In the political context this was a way to re-enforce the role of episcopacy in the church and require all Church of England people to come before the bishop. A policy developed that those from dissenting traditions needed to be episcopally confirmed in transferring into the Church of England. This is still enforced, particularly if you are intending to take up an office in the church (e.g. Reader) or are being ordained.

Roman Catholics and Orthodox who become Anglicans are 'received' into the Church, rather than being confirmed, as they have been previously episcopally confirmed.⁸ In fact, in the Roman Catholic Church, priests may administer 'confirmation' and in the Orthodox churches, priests chrismate, i.e. they anoint the candidate with chrism which has been previously blessed by the bishop. This is deemed, by the Church of England, to be equivalent to episcopal confirmation.⁹ *Common Worship: Christian Initiation* includes the full text of new rites of Reception into the Communion of the Church of England, which may be used in such circumstance, and which may be presided over by the local presbyter, rather than requiring the presence of a bishop. These are signs of the service books acknowledging a steady flow of people changing their allegiance and expressing their Christian faith in the Church of England, a pattern of transfer growth.

The pattern of transfer growth is only likely to increase in a context where the individual choice of the Christian is raised above the social cohesion of national churches. This is increasingly true in much of Europe, and is strengthened by popular beliefs about the right to choose.

⁷ See Tovey 2005.

⁸ See Reception into the Communion of the Church of England within a Celebration of Holy Communion in Church of England 1998: 211 ff.

⁹ Paradoxically *Common Worship* allows an infant to be chrismated at baptism (note 10 page 100) but it is not deemed confirmation (p. 348)!

Conversion models

A service of 'Baptism for those of Riper Years' came rather slowly to the Church of England and was introduced in 1662. The post-Commonwealth period had the experience of teenagers in England asking for baptism. The establishment of colonies in the Americas was leading to the conversion of some of the native peoples. The plantations in the West Indies also had a need of a baptism service appropriate for some of the slaves who had been transported there. Suddenly, Anglicans had to deal with conversion growth and adult baptism.

Charles Wheatly, in his appendix supplementing his *Rational Illustration of the Book of Common Prayer* (this extra passage added soon after 1662), comments:

In the infancy of Christianity adult persons were generally the subjects of baptism; yet after several nations that have been converted were become Christian, baptism was always administered to children. So that when the Liturgy of the Church of England was first compiled an office of adult persons was not so necessary.

The need for the new service was, in his mind, because of Quakers and Anabaptists. But he also mentions Jews and Turks as needing conversion. As yet he had not considered native peoples in Africa and the Americans. Thus, 1662 included a more conversionist missional strand in this new service acknowledging that adults were coming to faith through gospel preaching. This sat alongside the biological model.

With the growth of Anglican mission and the British Empire, some overseas dioceses and then provinces developed approaches to mission based on the patristic models. Catechists and catechumens were introduced. The rite for the admission of a catechumen was approved in the Church of the Province of Southern Africa and in the Church of South India.¹⁰ Catechumens are adults who are undergoing preparation for baptism. Service books from those churches contain the rites as a development of the Prayer Book tradition. This was perhaps more often a high church expression of mission, but it was a clear conversion model of growth, set in a context of teaching and growth to adult faith expressed in baptism.

A further impetus for the development of catechumenal models came from the Roman Catholic Church at the Second Vatican Council. Due to pressure, in part from France and Africa, the Roman Catholic Church revived fourth century models in the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA).¹¹ This has been adapted for uses in other churches e.g. ECUSA (1988) and the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America (1997).¹²

Rites on the Way,¹³ the services that form one of the major parts of *Common Worship: Christian Initiation* (2006) were carefully constructed considering some of the learning from these other churches. The report *On the Way* (1995), mostly drafted by Michael Vasey, encouraged the integration of faith development in groups with pastorally relevant actions in worship. *Rites on the Way* includes prayers of welcome for those preparing for the baptism of their children, but there is a much longer section of prayers for *adults* preparing for baptism, including:

10 Church of the Province of South Africa 1954; The Church of South India 1963.

11 Roman Catholic Church 1976, 1983.

12 ECUSA 1988 and Lutheran Church 1997.

13 Church of England Liturgical Commission 1998.

- a welcome at the beginning of the process,
- prayers for use within small groups (such as an Alpha, Emmaus, or similar, course),
- a celebration of the decision to be baptised,
- prayers in preparation for the baptismal service.

Now it would be possible to dismiss most of these rites as a typical liturgists' exercise in liturgical archaeology, producing pastorally inappropriate rites. This criticism could be levelled at the language (as seen for example in the Roman Catholic RCIA) of catechumens, election, and exorcistic prayers. *Rites on the Way* accepted many of these criticisms (and so avoids these technical terms) but understood that there is an important connection to be made between mission, baptism, catechesis, and Christian development. These links are essential to the life and mission of the church. Indeed there is a whole series of ideas underlying *Rites on the Way* that challenge much received practice, including:

- adult baptism is normative and our starting point for baptismal reflection,
- people need stages to get to faith and this needs to be recognized,
- baptism is a corporate action of the whole church,
- baptism is the point of our call to mission and ministry.

The incorporation of these ideas in *Common Worship: Christian Initiation* puts the new material in a more missionary mode than previous baptismal rites of the Church of England. They centre the liturgy on mission, provided we do not contort it through a lens of 'birth-rite models', or an 'occasional office' approach, in a way which ingores the insights of *On the Way*. The danger is that by reading the text with an *ASB* mentality, ministers search for the infant baptism rite and pay no attention to the rest of the provision and by so doing miss these important developments.

In the light of this tracing of different models and different patterns in church history, we now turn to look at some of the ideas that underpin *Common Worship: Christian Initiation* and see how they might affect contemporary mission in the local church.

Adult Baptism

In the post-Reformation baptismal debate there was a tendency for the language used by different perspectives to polarise churches that practise infant baptism (paedobaptist) and those that practise adult baptism into two mutually exclusive groups. This was compounded by the paedobaptist churches, in practice, doing very few adult baptisms and giving the impression that their baptismal theology took infant baptism as the starting point. This resulted in a skewing of the Christian tradition. Recent theological discussion has reaffirmed that there are not two theologies of baptism, one for infants and another for adults, but one baptism.¹⁴

Pastoral practice has also been changing. There has been a decline in the number of infant baptisms, and a robust number of adult baptisms, as shown in the recent statistics for the Church of England. In 2006, there were 9,300 adult

¹⁴ See, for example, WCC 1982 and the IALC 1991 Toronto statement in Holeton 1993.

baptisms, a 2% increase on the previous year.¹⁵ Experiencing adult baptisms can change the local congregation, as it realises that Christianity is a missionary faith, and that this even applies in their parish. Mission in England today will inevitably result in adult conversion growth and these people will need to be baptised. One of the effects of infant baptism is the 'Aaah affect' as the baby is shown to the congregation, but this natural sentimentalism may make it harder for the congregation to engage with baptism as a missionary sacrament. There is a potential at an adult baptism for a different effect (perhaps more 'Wow!' than 'Aaah!') – one that more clearly indicates the challenge of mission for the whole church.

One of the results of the growing number of adult baptisms in the Church of England is that more churches are building baptism tanks which allow for the immersion or submersion of adults. This is a good thing, and of itself signals a shift to an expectation of adult baptism. The symbolism, however, is weakened if these tanks are installed beneath floor level (as they often are, following common practice in some churches), covered most of the time by moveable panels. If a font in another part of the church (perhaps an ancient stone font) is used for infant baptisms, the impression can be given that there are two types of baptism – one for adults and one for children, with little to link them. Indeed, terminology may further suggest that what happens at the font is not 'baptism' at all, as infant baptisms are often referred to as 'christenings', but adult baptisms are not. A moveable font placed and used above, or adjacent to, the sunken baptism tank would at least give a visual signal about the connection between infant and adult baptisms, but there is a clearer way of making this connection explicit. Much better are the conjoined baptisteries near the entrance of the church, which include both a bowl and a tank. In the very stones the church then proclaims that all people, both adults and children come into the Christian community through baptism, and that this is central to our understanding of being church.

Baptism and the church

What is expressed in the local presbyter baptising in the afternoon with only the family present? That baptism is a purely family affair? That the rest of the church is not needed? Some have tried to undermine this old model by insisting on baptism being held in the main service, with all the attending practical and pastoral problems that can sometimes follow. Part of the problem is of the regulars not seeing baptism as anything to do with them. Baptism is the job of the clergy, with no need of lay involvement. Indeed baptism is not really seen as joining the community at all.¹⁶

Rites on the Way challenges this thinking. The adapted catechumenal model it contains sees joining the church community as integral to baptism. This is not just a theological ideology, but needs to have a pastoral application, including helping families who bring children for baptism to get to know the regulars. Thus people who have a ministry of befriending families become an essential part of this baptismal approach. Indeed the whole preparation policy needs to move away from the clergy visiting families alone, or them coming to the vicarage. We need imaginative pastoral involvement e.g. holding preparation in the house of a lay

¹⁵ See, Church Statistics at <http://www.cofe.anglican.org/info/statistics/> (accessed 02/08).

¹⁶ For practical advice on how to tackle some of these issues, see Earey, Lloyd, and Tarrant 2007.

church member, and getting other church members to come along. Simple ways of including a variety of people in the process breaks out of baptism being a clergy thing. For the baptism of infants, work with parents in the school or toddler groups needs to be seen as integral to outreach and pre-baptismal mission. We need to move to seeing mission and baptism as being the responsibility of the whole church.

This is the mindset behind *Rites on the Way*. The church is a baptising community and thus many should be involved in the process of baptism. Note that baptism here is seen as a process. *Rites on the Way* has optional stages for adults to show growing faith. This fits in well with findings that most people require time to come to faith, hence the importance of nurture groups (Alpha, Emmaus). In light of the research of people needing stages to coming to faith, churches need to see work with adults in nurture groups as central and not an optional extra. Once again the simple involvement of all Christians is important. It's about candidates getting to know people, becoming part of the community, belonging as a part of the process of coming to faith.

Fostering an understanding of baptism as being central to the life of the whole church, and not just families, candidates, and the clergy, is another part of the understanding of *Rites on the Way*. In part, the rites of welcome of candidates to the community and intercession for them are designed to foster this, but it will also require some practical rooting. This can be applied both in baptismal preparation and in confirmation ministry. Sadly, the pattern in many churches has often been somewhat different: the confirmation service was held in another church, rather than our own. The curate had done the preparation, but candidates for confirmation were never introduced to the congregation or prayed for in the services. Nor was any mention made of the fact that people had been confirmed. They just started regularly receiving communion. Confirmation was not a part of the life of the congregation but a privatised rite for those who wanted it. Our pastoral practice has sometimes denied our theological assertions of being a baptising community.

Baptism and mission

The Great Commission in Matthew 28 includes in it mission, teaching, baptising and discipleship. The seventeenth-century evangelical revival, working in a Christendom context, emphasised the importance of conversion. The gospel to the baptised of England was, 'You must be born again'. This led to a weakening of evangelical theology, because poor connections were made between evangelism and baptism. Indeed, participation in interdenominational mission led to baptism being relegated as secondary to conversion. Thus a mission service called people to receive Christ at an altar call. There was, however, no corresponding call to the font or any question about baptismal status. Salvation could be explained by four spiritual laws, but these did not include baptism. This was a pragmatic way of working with the diversity of baptismal theology, but ultimately inadequate according to the Scriptures. It is time that this is reassessed.

Scripture connects baptism and mission. The preaching of the gospel leads to baptisms. They are not two separate activities but one work of the Spirit. Sometimes it has seemed in evangelical practice that conversion is all that is expected, and

baptism is less important. This cannot be justified from the Bible and is the expression of a theology from a particular cultural context, i.e. a context where most people were baptised, would call themselves Christians, and had a basic knowledge of the faith. That context has now changed, as the church is increasingly aware, and so we must expect some theological reappraisal of mission in the new context, and how this is expressed in the liturgy of baptism.

Common Worship: Christian Initiation can be read with ASB eyes. This may then produce some disappointment about the wordiness of the service and the loss of the phrase 'you must answer for yourselves and for this child', which some saw as expressing many years of evangelical thinking on baptism. Perhaps the ASB was working from residual thinking of a national church in a primarily Christian context, while, within that, also trying to challenge indiscriminate baptism. This is not the context of the church today. The Church is much more aware of being in a post-Christian context, with many elements of Christian England having been eroded, e.g. in the position given to Sunday. Also, the declining numbers of infant baptisms shows a falling off in Christian practice. This is in comparison with the census statistics on claims to be a Christian. Faith seems to be increasingly divorced from church-based practice. Baptismal policy now needs to be firmly set within the mission policy of the parish. With the mission of the local church as top priority, baptism will necessarily become an issue, as adults come to faith and need to be baptised. *Common Worship* envisages this as an integral part of the life of the local church.

Conclusion

The Church of England was born within the context of a Christian nation where mission was primarily about biological growth. Gradually it had to accommodate to conversion growth, including adults coming to faith, with (immediately post-Commonwealth) the rise of Anabaptist views, the beginnings of mission overseas, and the growing secularisation of England. The present social context is changed from that of the previous prayer books. Infant baptism is no longer the norm even for families that may have ticked 'Christian' in the census. In the current mixed context the focus of the church on mission is reflected in the new material in *Common Worship: Christian Initiation*. Parishes need to focus on mission and to see that the new material aims to strengthen the link between baptism and mission. To see this we will need to read the texts in a new way, moving on from our ASB preconceptions, and reconnecting baptism and mission in our theology.

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