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## Glimpsing the church of the future?

(Pete Ward in his book **Liquid Church**, envisions how the church of the future could be. Ward poses these possibilities out of strong sociological and theological research. The following are excerpts from his book pp2-4. This book is well worth a read if you are interested in the church for the future.)

### What is Liquid Church?

To get the imaginative juices flowing I suggest that we need to shift from seeing church as a gathering of people meeting in one place at one time - that is, a congregation - to a notion of church as a series of relationships and communications. This image implies something like a network or a web rather than an assembly of people. An example of this was given to me by a research student who saw nothing strange in the idea of a liquid church made up of informal relationships instead of formal meetings. He explained that before we met for our academic seminar, he was in a coffee shop with one of his Christian friends. As they talked, he said, he felt that Christ was communicated between them. For him this was church. This is a familiar notion of fellowship, but when one adds the definite article to the word *fellowship*, it takes on a different character. "The Fellowship" indicates a more structured, static, and formal notion of church. My phrase for describing this shift toward structures, institutions and meetings is

solid church.

So the first move in imagining a liquid church is to take the informal fellowship, in which we experience Christ as we share with other Christians, and say this is church. Maybe this idea is neither threatening nor revolutionary. However, the implications are profound. First, it implies that church might be something that we make with each other by communicating Christ, so it is not an institution as such. Second, it indicates that church happens when people are motivated to communicate with each other. In other words its basis lies in people's spiritual activity rather than organisational patterns or buildings. Third and more controversially, I suggest that a liquid church does not need or require a weekly congregational meeting. In place of going to church, the emphasis could be on living as Christ's body in the world. Worship and meeting with others will still have a place, but worship and meeting will be decentred and reworked in ways that are designed to connect to the growing spiritual hunger in society rather than being a place for the committed to belong (i.e., some kind of religious club).

This description raises the question of social organisation. What will liquid church look like? My response is to point to the way in which contemporary media, business, and finance are based on

networks of communication. The argument is that communication of Christ through informal fellowship creates connections, groupings, and relationships. These can be seen as a kind of network where the Holy Spirit is at work creating church. Stuart Murray described this to me as the shift from church as a noun to church as a verb. So we can say, "I church, you church, we church." For too long we have seen church as something that we attend. We might sing a few hymns or even play a more active role, but there is something passive and even a little alienating about the externalised and rather monolithic idea of church. If, however, church is something that comes about when we make it, then walls come tumbling down. Suddenly being church and doing church become an exciting adventure....Liquid church is essential because existing patterns of church fail to connect with the evident spiritual interest

and hunger that we see. For some people, church as we know it is rewarding. Sunday worship is a meaningful activity, and the fellowship is a place where we can serve Christ and establish our identity with other Christians. For these people and for those who lead their congregations, liquid church is not a matter of urgency. I understand this, and am sympathetic to the successful church. It lacks credibility to claim that these churches will wither and die in the face of cultural change (whatever term we use for it - post-Christian, post-Christendom, postmodern). The problem is not with those who come to church, since it seems for them church is generally a positive environment. The real issue must be for those who no longer attend church or those who have never set foot inside one. How do we connect with these people?

(Pete Ward., *Liquid Church*. USA: Hendrikson Publishers & UK: Paternoster Press 2002)

**Spirited Exchanges is again having a presence at the Parachute Music Festival 2004. In 2001 Jenny led a seminar on 'Why People Leave Churches', attended by around 300 people. This time because of new policy with seminars we cannot do that, so instead we are going to try running a stand in the missions tent of the global village to promote Spirited Exchanges. This will possibly be somewhat different to the main tenor of the tent and maybe even controversial, but worth us being there for people who might relate to what we offer.**

**If any of you are at Parachute, please come and make yourselves known to me. I would love to meet you.**

**Please Note:**

- Spirited Exchanges is in the process of changing its server. The new address will be spiritex@central.org.nz This is still being set up so in the interim you can use jenny@central.org.nz
- Jenny McIntosh will be away from mid December to mid January, and Alan Jamieson from mid December to mid February. We will hasten to reply to any emails after those dates.

**We wish you all a peaceful and meaningful Christmas**

## **The Church Family**

- a prose poem

Innocence walked in one Sunday. It was a Summers day and she wore a blue dress. She stood out from the rest, with her dress of blue,

her hair of gold,

arms and legs daring to be naked.

She was young, she was happy; she was passionate, idealistic; she was welcomed with open arms and a coat to wear.

She hung the coat on a chair, she waved her hands in the air, she danced under the stares of the older members. They prayed for her, they disciplined her, they got her to wear the coat. She was taught to clap in time, she was taught to tidy her hair, she was taught the Holy Trinity - Pastor, Song and Holy Bible. They disciplined her, dressed her, and they married her off.

Innocence married Tradition. It was an Autumn day and she wore her coat under her wedding dress. Tradition had grown up in the family - a nice,

sensible,

steady man.

Always wore a suit and tie. She was rostered onto cooking and cleaning, and when she had time presented him with three fine, young sons.

Deeds was the oldest - a good boy, always wishing to please. Religion was next - took after his father, always up the front. Guilt was the youngest - a demanding boy, but you couldn't blame him for it. In years to come, family photos showed the family off.

Innocence dwarfed by husband and sons; lost her looks, her smile, her blue dress. But hugged the coat tighter, serving her family. Innocence was needed.

Innocence was buried before her time. Old and jaded, she died. They buried her in her old, worn, precious coat.

Disappointed, disillusioned, but giving

and giving

and giving

and giving

and giving to the end.

**Robbie Titchener**

## Book Review

### The Heartbreaker

By Susan Howatch

Little Brown Publishing 2003

This is the story of a high class and very successful sex worker who is living a lie. Underneath the sex and sleaze lies a severely wounded young person caught in an intricate web of power and evil. Through a series of serendipitous meetings two lives, both in search of freedom and a new life come into contact with each other. Those who have read any of 'The Starbridge' novels or the first two novels from the St Benet's series - 'A Question of Integrity' or 'The High Flyer' will immediately recognise some of the characters such as Nicholas Darrow, Lewis, and Carta Graham as well as Howatch's style as she weaves key theological discussion into the lives of her characters.

St Benet's, is a healing centre, operating out of an old church in London. It brings together the professional skills of modern medicine, psycho-therapy and spiritual direction under a wider canvas of Christian healing which allows for God to be very much at work in individual's lives. The centre incorporates a mix of prayer, counselling and healing services. In relationship, God is able to bring real healing to broken lives - the kind of healing that brings integrity of body, mind and spirit. Running below the story line, the complex sexual moral issues of homosexuality, prostitution, marriage and non-married partnerships that have permeated the modern church are teased out.

A number of key themes are dealt with through the lives of the characters - many are worthy of note, but a couple caught my eye. The first is the role of community

in discussing and praying together in order to discern a course of action in a complex ethical minefield. In the novel no easy answers are given. No simple rule-based morality is tolerated.

As one of the characters says in the midst of the community search for answers - *"I think this is one of those cases where we have to acknowledge the conventional rules and then summon the courage to step outside them. My father used to say that only by wholeheartedly embracing the monastic framework could a monk know when it was safe to step outside that framework in order to serve God in a situation where an orthodox response seemed inadequate."* Another describes the process saying - *"We talked and talked. Some people think Christians have an easy time deciding what's right and what's wrong, but they are usually the people who think Christianity is a monolith, all Christians are fundamentalists and the Bible is like an ethical phone directory, listing every correct response in black and white."* Howatch certainly doesn't opt for a simple right and wrong, black and white approach. Human sexuality and spirituality are too complex, too intertwined for that.

The second was the place for a multi-disciplinary approach to well-being, drawing together the place of salvation and integrity, medicine and prayer, relationship and psycho-therapy, gentle care and the honest confronting of issues.

I've read all of Howatch's novels in the Starbridge and St Benet's series. Each time I've said the latest is her best - it's definitely the case with 'The Heartbreaker'. **Alan Jamieson**

For any contributions to, or comments you would like to make about the newsletter or if you would like to come off the mailing list please write to the Editor: **Jenny McIntosh at P.O. Box 11551, Wellington** or on email: **jenny@central.org.nz** or soon to be set up **spiritex@central.org.nz** For Alan Jamieson: **alan@central.org.nz** or **aj@paradise.net.nz** (note change of emails).