

Bearing Faithful Witness - Resources

Exploring what it means to become a community that responds to "our people" by living and communicating a good news story.

RESOURCE #11

Belonging and Believing

Stuart Murray, excerpts from chapter 1 of **Church After Christendom**

The language of 'belonging' and 'believing' (and less often 'behaving') has become familiar in discussions about faith, church and mission. It offers helpful perspectives on issues facing churches after Christendom.

Researchers and sociologists, examining the relationship between what people believe and their participation in religious institutions, have identified two common positions – 'believing without belonging' and 'belonging before believing'. Some people do not belong to a church but identify themselves as Christians and hold beliefs that are more or less consistent with those who do belong. Others participate in church before they identify themselves as Christians or decide what they believe.

What factors have prompted 'belonging before believing' even in churches that previously required that belief precede participation? ... The most obvious are the cultural shifts signaled by the terms 'postmodernity' and 'post-Christendom':

- In postmodernity, people are suspicious of institutions and more interested in whether beliefs work in practice than whether they are theoretically true. So belonging before believing is necessary to test whether Christians live out in their communities what they claim to be true.
- In post-Christendom, knowledge of Christianity is limited; people need longer to understand and respond to the gospel. Furthermore, church culture is alien, so exploratory participation is safer than making a definite commitment.

Many emerging churches practice 'belonging before believing', considering this vital for engaging with a postmodern constituency. This approach attracts refugees from churches with firm boundaries that have resisted this paradigm shift. A 'centered-set' model of community is also popular, in contradistinction to the 'bounded-set' model operating in many inherited churches. Centered-set communities represent a dynamic and flexible approach, allowing people to journey towards or away from a church without encountering fixed entry or exit points.

Discussions about the relationship between belonging and believing have highlighted significant missional and pastoral issues:

- The inadequacy of equating Christians exclusively with those who belong to churches.
- The importance of affirming the faith journeys of those whose conversion is gradual.
- The limitations of institutional membership models in contemporary culture.
- The challenge of building churches that faithfully and attractively incarnate the gospel they proclaim.
- The implications of prioritizing core values over boundary maintenance.

Believing and belonging

In pre-Christendom (roughly the first three centuries before the Christendom shift), believing and belonging were well-integrated. Belonging was vital for believers as a deviant minority in an alien environment; and only believers would dare belong to an illegal organization subject to persecution.

Although Christians shared their faith freely with friends and neighbours, church meetings were not open to outsiders: the danger of spies infiltrating the community precluded this. Those who expressed interest in Christianity explored this through a lengthy and demanding process known as catechesis. This explained what Christians believed and how they behaved. It also assessed whether enquirers were ready to take further steps towards belonging. Catechists assumed no familiarity with the Christian story or its values; and, since belonging meant participating in a counter-cultural community, learning what to believe and how to behave were both necessary. Neither belonging before believing nor believing without belonging was feasible. Growth in believing and belonging (and behaving) went hand in hand...

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Belonging but not yet believing

We will need hospitable post-Christendom churches in which those who do not yet believe can participate as they explore faith. But 'belonging before believing' is actually the classic Christendom model. If we work with it in post-Christendom, we must beware Christendom temptations – waiting for people to come to us rather than going to them, downplaying conversion (whether through crisis or process) and underestimating the necessary induction process.

Believing but not yet belonging

As post-Christendom develops, some who have no connection with any church will come to faith through relationships with individual Christians. Incarnational forms of mission are emerging that no longer rely on attractional methods or people eager to belong before they believe. In these creative and courageous initiatives centrifugal mission is replacing centripetal mission. If 'belonging before believing' is applicable to such initiatives, the key is Christians 'belonging' within many neighbourhoods and networks, and building relationships through which 'believing' can begin.

Those who become believers may not assume 'belonging' is an important expression of 'believing'. They may not be averse to belonging, but church participation will not be automatic for them. But those who believe before they belong – even more than those who belong before they believe – will need more thorough discipling than most churches thought necessary in the last decades of Christendom. Post-Christendom converts, like pre-Christendom converts, will be joining counter-cultural communities with deviant values and beliefs rooted in an unfamiliar story.

Neither belonging nor believing

One category remains. In post-Christendom the vast majority of people will probably neither belong nor believe. Projections based on a continuation of current patterns of church decline suggest the Christian community will be much smaller by 2030 than it is today. Projections based on measurements of what people believe indicate believing without belonging will also diminish. There is nothing deterministic about this, but honesty and realism are important if we are to respond faithfully and creatively to the challenges ahead.

What is less clear is the relationship between ceasing to believe and ceasing to belong. Stephen Green writes: 'Conventional wisdom and common sense suggest that people stopped going to church because they no longer believed what the churches taught them. Perhaps the causal mechanism was really closer to the opposite: they stopped believing because they stopped going.'

At the heart of our response must be recalibration of the church as a cross-cultural missionary movement. believing and belonging may be more integrally connected in post-Christendom than they have been since pre-Christendom. Belonging before believing may persist, but belonging without believing will surely disappear; and believing without belonging will be unsustainable in post-Christendom, where both believing and belonging will be minority pursuits of 'resident aliens' in a strange new world...

Churches with healthy centers are secure enough to welcome those who are exploring faith and searching for authenticity. They are relaxed, non-judgmental communities where questions, doubts, dissent and fears can be expressed, and where ethical issues do not preclude acceptance. They are inclusive without compromising, communities with deep convictions that are nevertheless open to fresh insights, churches that allow and encourage critical engagement with beliefs and behaviour but test everything by its congruence with their founding story.

Is this model a legitimate way of describing the community that travelled with Jesus? He invited people to follow him, to become disciples and commit themselves to the vision and values of God's kingdom, but to remain open to others and to fresh insights rather than thinking they had arrived. Is it the model operating in Acts 11 as Peter and the Jerusalem church assess his experience in light of their core convictions and the life and teaching of Jesus? This principled flexibility allows them to weigh up Peter's report, welcome Cornelius and debate what counter-cultural discipleship might mean for Gentiles. Will post-Christendom churches find the centered-set model liberating and sustaining?

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Conversion

Acts 11 records a double conversion – not only Cornelius and his household, but also Peter and the Jerusalem church. This conversion was transformational for Cornelius and for the mission of a hitherto Jewish church. Conversion involves a paradigm shift, a new way of seeing the world. Whenever mission involves evangelism rather than proselytism (imposing our norms), double conversions like this will occur.

Conversion is another biblical dynamic the Christendom shift has distorted. Sensitive Christians shy away from this terminology, aware that it connotes pressure to conform to particular beliefs and behaviour and implies submission to the superior wisdom and righteousness of those already 'converted'. Conversion historically has often meant an imperialistic (and sometimes coercive) demand for obedience to the institutions, creed and ethical norms of a dominant church.

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But the understandable aversion of Christians and others to conversion language must not preclude the recovery in post-Christendom churches of an authentic biblical emphasis on conversion. There are dangers here. Does 'belonging before believing' delay indefinitely questions of ultimate allegiance? Do process evangelism courses downplay the crisis of decisive commitment to Jesus Christ as lord? Do centered-set churches imply no paradigm shift is necessary for those who would follow Jesus?

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Churches after Christendom will need a robust but chastened theology of conversion. Invitations to follow Jesus must be winsome rather than overbearing. And they must imply an ongoing journey of discipleship for those issuing as well as receiving such invitations. Conversion is a paradigm shift that stimulates new ways of thinking and living, not arrival at a pre-determined destination. Conversion is multidirectional and lifelong.

This understanding of conversion changes the tone and content of evangelism. Peter's vision, the shock to his theology it represented and his encounter with Cornelius affected his message. His opening words – 'I now realize how true it is that God does not show favouritism but accepts those from every nation who fear him and do what is right' – are humble, grateful and directed as much to himself as to Cornelius.

The testimony of the New Testament, pre-Christendom churches and later dissenting groups is consistent: conversion is crucial for building Christian communities. Post-Christendom churches will disavow the Christendom distortions and welcome the opportunity to recover a gracious but radical understanding of conversion.