

Jim Punton - The Base Church

IN THE MID 1950's THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN LATIN AMERICA WAS FACED BY A SERIOUS CHALLENGE. IT HAD INSUFFICIENT CLERGY, YET IT COULD FUNCTION ONLY BY CLERGY. THE POOREST COMMUNITIES WENT WITHOUT A PRIEST. IN BRAZIL, BISHOP ROSSI RECOGNISED THAT NOT ONLY WAS THE CHURCH BEGINNING TO DIMINISH IN MANY AREAS BUT, EVEN WHERE IT HAD CLEAR PRESENCE, A SEMI-PAGANISM PERMEATED IT WHERE IT HAD NEVER BECOME FULLY CHRISTIAN.

Rossi also recognised that communism was growing fast because the Church had not stood alongside the poor. Marxism was making strong inroads and people were finding vitality and support in Marxism that they were not finding in the church.

Prompted by elderly peasant women, Bishop Rossi came up with a plan. He set up community co-ordinators and a training programme for people who would get groups together to sustain their churches in the absence of a priest. They met for prayer and Bible study and promoted a sense of awareness of church as 'the people of God'. In that first year (1956) 372 people were trained as 'people's catechists'. These were lay people and many of them were women. They met in homes where rural areas didn't have church buildings. They met daily for prayer and on week nights for Bible study - the Bible was absolutely at the centre of their movement. They met on Sundays and holy days and, though they weren't able to have the Eucharist, they were able to follow the words. They felt encouraged to do 'in Spirit' what they could not do in fact. In their Catholic tradition, they were beginning something very significant.

The catechists started home visits and information they brought to the little gatherings informed their prayer. Poverty, hardship, illness, battles with landlords over land, injustices that local people were experiencing were fed back in the prayer groups. This motivated them to consider what they could do - how could they be present to the people who were suffering? How could they begin to do something so that injustices did not continue? Going from house to house they found themselves becoming counsellors. They were enabling the poor to take

responsibility for their own lives and difficulties and cope with them. Here were people who had been organised just to hold things together now becoming competent leaders in their neighbourhoods, with awareness of the difficulties, mobilising and motivating the people and functioning as enablers and facilitators. People began to be free to act. Women wanted to know how they could make things for their kids - so sewing classes started as part of the life of the church. When it was realised how many adults were illiterate, schooling was started. The literacy movement became linked with the groups that were studying the Bible. Small meeting places built for the house groups were then used as clinics.

These home based mission centres were now taking on the total needs of their particular neighbourhood. There was action against malnutrition and illness; there was help for local people in their poverty; there was mobilisation towards civil and human rights and justice. They became groups of very real solidarity. Ordinary folk began to flock to them. Here was hope.

In the gospels we see ordinary people gravitating to Jesus. Whenever he went into a house he couldn't get out for the crowd. Why was it that ordinary people crammed in on him? Why did the authorities find him threatening? Why didn't they want anything to do with him? Why is it that when we look at the apostles as they go round in the life of the early church again the same thing happens? The ordinary folk gather round them. The apostles don't have to plan campaigns - the ordinary folk flock to them! The authorities ask 'How can we put a stop to this?' They can't stop it because of the people. So something quite different was happening. Around Jesus there was a people movement.

The significance of this must be that Jesus offered hope. There was significance in his presence for people who had no hope and no power. With him they felt empowered; they sensed hope; they sensed possibility for themselves. The same was true for the early church. Those who did not want ordinary folk to

have that power and that hope were the ones who felt threatened. So it has been in Latin America.

The base churches, then, began to experience sharing, identification with one another in suffering, discovery of prayer and its power for healing and reconciliation. They were finding resources to forgive enemies even as they confronted the system. There was another significant development - song. The song of the people has always gone along with renewal. The nature of renewal is indicated by song. The song which is part of the renewal movement in Britain is thoroughly middle class; renewal has been a middle class renewal. But we mustn't deceive ourselves into thinking that this renewal has permeated society. We are still waiting for the song that comes up from the people, the people who will form the base church movement in Britain.

In 1962 came the Second Vatican Council. This was of major importance. Pope John XXIII offered hope to those in the base churches. There was new emphasis on the Bible in the hands of the people, emphasis on the church as the people of God and as open to the world; there was a new understanding of mission and an emphasis on social justice world-wide. In 1962 Bishop Rossi encouraged the Movement for Grass Roots Education in Brazil. Radio schools were started with straightforward education instruction and information. But the really significant breakthrough for the base church movement came when the Bishop conducted Mass over the radio. He invited the catechists listening to follow the actions that accompanied his words. Groups all over Brazil, lay people, were conducting Holy Communion while the Bishop said the words over the radio. Think what that must have meant emotionally for people. They were finding a new understanding of a shared priesthood, a different way of looking at the priesthood of all believers. Lay catechists, a great many of them women, were now doing everything that priests would normally have done. It was perfectly legal because the words were pronounced and the bread and wine actually blessed by the Bishop. The grass roots churches now sensed themselves to be in every sense 'church'. - not mission stations, not half way houses, but each group was church.

The movement for Grass Roots Education employed the educational methods of Paulo Freire. People who were

illiterate learned to read in no time at all. Those who'd been terrified of anything in print suddenly found the excitement of being able to read. And their joy was greatest in being able to read God's Word.

Built into all community development is what the Latin Americans call conscientization, the raising of awareness. What situation are we in? What causes it? Who is behind it? Who is responsible? People now began to throw off the fatalism that said, "We are where we are just because we are, and nothing can be done about it." With new awareness they now said "We are where we are for certain reasons. If we can track down those reasons and find the causes we can effect change."

That's part of what Jesus was about. Evils were to be challenged and changed and the people of God were to have a responsibility in that as the Spirit gave signs of God's Kingdom.

This was a whole new thing for a people who had been fatalistic in their acceptance of social conditions. It was seen that change was possible and if change was to be effected it had to be effected from the bottom up. If we look back in British history we have to recognise that the justice which has come has come by and large because ordinary people have been prepared sacrificially to confront those who held the power. This power was surrendered with great reluctance, to maintain stability. Each time just a little bit was given to the people. Today, we have a tendency to take for granted that our own situation has always been, and then look at the people who are struggling now as if they were fighting for something unfair and unjust. In fact, power has always been wrested from those who have it. Unless the Spirit of God steps in, people don't surrender power voluntarily.

As it developed and took account of the situation it was in, the church movement began to talk about 'the evangelisation of the baptised'. This may not mean much to those of us who have been brought up in Brethren, Baptist or Pentecostal circles, but in the churches that baptise infants we have an enormous number of people who have been baptised for whom baptism has little if any significance. The same is true in the Catholic Church. If the state is Catholic everybody is automatically baptised in infancy. Instead of assuming that the

baptised were on the right side of things, the base church movement began a programme of evangelisation directed towards the many thousands of nominal adherents calling them to become what baptism had declared.

In 1962 the National Council of Bishops drew up an emergency plan. It called for the renewal of clergy, an increase in the number of schools and a commitment to the spreading of base churches for shared life, worship, faith and action. The Council recognised that the base church movement was the strategy by which the gospel was going to be communicated to a people whom they saw as increasingly paganised or secularised. But 1964 saw the military revolution in Brazil. It tried to stem the tide of the popular movements, but failed. What happened was open conflict between Church and State.

By 1965 it was now the specific plan of the bishops that parishes should consist of grassroots communities. Existing priests and sisters were to be available to the base churches, to be itinerant and supportive but to keep their hands off decision making. Priests and nuns functioned in an enabling role but the power and the decision making lay with grassroots teams.

The 1968 Council of Bishops recognised how the movement had spread. Base churches were now in Brazil, Honduras, Chile, Panama, Equador,

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Bolivia, Columbia, Nicaragua, San Salvador, the Dominican Republic and Praguay - the whole of the Latin American continent, in fact. About the same year we find a parallel movement emerging in Italy, Holland, Belgium and France. And the Spirit is creating similar base churches in Asia and Africa. It's a slightly different movement in Europe, but linked. In some areas, it's a movement from the grassroots; in others it's a movement of people who've never been grassroots but who want to be identified with this as a movement of the Spirit, people who've recognised that Jesus has called them into solidarity with those at grassroots. Liberation Theology is of

this nature; educated, seminary trained men and women, identifying with the experience of the base churches have developed theologies from it. Liberation Theology is a sometimes complex way of articulating the experience of the grassroots churches.

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This was frightening for reactionaries to hear; coming, as it did, from the Latin American Council of Bishops. Between 1970 and 1974 all of the countries we've mentioned had national courses of reflection on grassroots community. Three hundred separate courses for bishops and clergy made sure that they knew what the grassroots communities were, and how to encourage them to grow in the Spirit. During the military regime in Brazil, the gap widened between the rich and poor. The hope that the poor had was focussed on the grassroots churches. The third conference of Bishops in Latin America in 1979 stated categorically that the grassroots churches were "an expression of the Church's preferential option for the poor." In other words, the gospel demands that priority be given to the powerless and the poor.

We cannot escape the fact that Jesus gave 'preferential option' to the poor. The hope for those who are powerful and wealthy lies in the new humanity that God brings up from those who are the victims of the way we live together as human beings. Hope comes in a christian community that is established at base. That's clearly what Jesus was about. There is no evidence at all that Jesus created two separate churches, one among the poor and one among the wealthy. Jesus created the kingdom people among those who were the victims in society. Those who were powerful and wealthy, if they wanted to identify with Jesus, had to identify with him there. That's the challenge he's constantly putting to those who are wealthy and powerful. He loved them; he wanted them on his side but there was only one place where they could join him. It's his place of healing and freedom.

In 1980 an estimate was made of the size of the base church movement. There were 80,000 grassroots communities in Brazil and some 150,000 others in the rest of Latin America.

Some features of the base church movement: Let's try to summarise the really positive factors.

1. It's a grassroots movement. 'Base' refers to the bottom of the socio-economic pyramid; it describes the place of social powerlessness and poverty, of political voicelessness; it is a movement among the most 'sinned against'. (We must be careful not to confuse the 'base churches' with 'Basic', in the sense of 'smallest unit'). Others who are not powerless can be part of the movement only when they "make their own the life, interests and aspirations of the poor and the oppressed" (says Gutierrez); they may enable and support but not supplant.
2. It's a church movement. Each 'base church' has a full sacramental life; it is not a 'house fellowship'. And it remains a welcome part of the historic Catholic Church.
3. It's a small-group movement. The size varies, but is normally between 15 and 35; sometimes four or five groups of 15-20 would together form the church.

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4. It's a fellowship movement. The small groups enable trust and acceptance; each person can be deeply known and affirmed: there's a sharing of suffering and hope, opportunity for vulnerability, experience of mutual support and shared values; solidarity is a mark of the movement. In it they can face oppression together.
5. It's a culturally authentic movement. The 'church' is experienced and demonstrated in the contemporary culture of the neighbourhood; in this way it is seen as alive and relevant and concerned.
6. It's a charismatic movement. Leadership is carried in the gifts of the Spirit, so it moves around the group in a dynamic way; participation marks group life. Any involvement of priests and nuns is supportive and under the local leadership.
7. It's Jesus movement. This is the dimension some have called 'protestant'. So excited have the base churches become with Jesus that 'saints' have been displaced; God is sensed as immediate and near and gracious.
8. It's a wholistic movement. It embraces the totality of life and overcomes dualisms like 'sacred' / 'secular'; it is involved in the full life of the neighbourhood and its concerns; it demands the whole person in emotion, action and thought.

9. It's a Bible centred movement. There is great delight in discovering God's word and the base churches come to it fresh, bringing their grassroots experience and insight; they study the Bible "from the underside" and hear a powerful message of God's solidarity with them, of his commitment to justice and liberation. Among them the Bible has not yet been domesticated to culture.
10. It's a hopeful movement. With a living relationship to God who is committed to their freedom and wholeness, there is expectancy of his acting for change. Fatalism has given way to hope. Many of them expect God to act in healing, to show himself in 'signs and wonders', to effect justice and create just structures.
11. It's an evangelistic movement. They speak much of 'evangelising the baptised' and encourage those baptised in infancy to experience the life of that baptism. They involve non-Christians in everything keeping themselves realistic and seeing these neighbours come to living faith.
12. It's a celebratory movement. Their worship is joyful and exuberant, with their own music, song and dance; it is directed to the living God; the Eucharist has changed its 'magical' ethos but retained its mystery; in it they share their solidarity with the sufferings of Christ now and take up suffering servanthood afresh in the world.
13. It's a prophetic movement. The reality of their experience of their changed values and relationships, offers either challenge or hope to the 'powers that be'. In issues of justice they make no pretence at neutrality; where they believe Jesus to be committed, they make that their social stance. They see as 'spiritual' whatever the Holy Spirit is about.

Some dangers in the movement: There's clearly a danger in coming to the Word using life and particular life experience; this is the danger of subjectivism, of bringing our subjective experiences, and fears, our hurts, our bitterness, our anger and reading them into the Bible. This can be linked to a domestication of the Bible. It's possible to read the Bible as a radical and find a way of domesticating it, so that it doesn't actually change our radical approach and our radical methods. Some people reading the gospels can make Jesus violent, and see him prepared to be violent against violence. I understand it but I don't find it in the Word. There are dangers of domesticating the Bible in

such a way that it reaffirms what we've arrived at by other means. The danger faces us all. Especially when there is no knowledge of biblical background and culture, there's the danger of an allegorical approach to Scripture. Instead of dealing with what the text says we see allusions which are not actually there; we say 'this represents this' and 'that represents the next thing'. The authority of the Bible is lost. Passages are made to mean what people choose to make them mean.

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Some differences between the South
American and British scenes.

1. Grassroots communities there are rural and pre-industrial; here they are not.
2. They are deeply religious and committed to the Catholic Church; in the UK they feel alienated from the church and are quite secularised.
3. They are not committed to competing with others for individual 'success'; in the UK the powerless often hope to 'make it' in the system and improve their lot by moving 'up' .
4. They have little reliance on professional outsiders; our 'deprived areas' are dominated by professional outsiders and incomers.
5. For them, injustice is often visibly embodied in powerful families or

individuals in the UK it comes most through anonymous institutions that can't be 'got at'.

6. They more often stand in solidarity against injustice; here the powerless are often fragmented and set against each other by racism etc.

7. There, the Catholic Church had the vision to encourage the movement and be encouraged by it; the councils of bishops have aligned the church with the poor; here there is no comparable commitment in the mainstream churches which are seen as allied to the powerful.

Conclusion

In spite of these clear and significant differences, and of the dangers we've noted my own feeling about the 'base church movement' is one of hope. We need it here. Those caught up from the 1950's in God's call to the poor in inner city areas, housing schemes etc. long for that hope to be real. If only all the positive features we've noted of the base church in Latin America could find whatever different expression they must in our society we would see Christian presence rooted in the real culture of urban areas. Let's not simply be daunted by the difficulties. Let's wrestle before God to know how the vision is to be realised. If it's a movement of God's Spirit it's he who'll be wrestling with us.
