

Transition and Hope - from Head, to Heart, to Hand

John Whitehead reminds us that 'we are the prophetic presence of the living and risen Jesus Christ'

Introduction

The purpose of this article on Transition is to set this world's present day challenges in the context of a global covenant theology. It argues that Transition Towns, a secular movement connecting Head, to Heart, to Hand, has a theological dimension which makes more incisive and inclusive a belief in God's Covenant with the whole 'biotic' community – a concern which is noticeably muted in Church debates. The underpinning theological 'given' is the ever-urgent call for Christians to proclaim the Gospel 'to the ends of the earth', in the conviction that the Kingdom proclaimed and the Covenant enacted by Jesus means this-worldly transformation, 'on earth as in heaven'.

New Initiatives

Today's mindset is increasingly contoured by media pressures, global commerce and centralised government. Yet it is also evident that pressing global issues have led to movements like Transition Towns and the Low Carbon Communities Network, which aim to reverse the damage caused by exploiting the global at the expense of the local. In *Rural Theology* 68 Vol. 5 Part 1 (2007) Edward Echlin notes that 'Distant (and eroding) fields that grow food for our supermarkets, and the sprawling estates built on fertile soil, are no substitute for the security of carefully nurtured and familial bioregional hinterlands' (p.4). Following the recent head-lined exposure of unidentified horse meat in beef burgers, many are asking, what precisely is in their packaged food, and where does it originate? – in 'distant fields' (and processing) certainly!

The Transition movement's evangelical purpose is to move from global dependence to local resilience.

Since its inception in 2005, inspired by the young permaculture designer Rob Hopkins at Kinsale, Ireland, it has mushroomed into some 400 community groups, including ventures in the USA and South America. Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall writes: 'My first experience of Transition came in 2008, when I travelled to Totnes to film a sequence about Garden Share, a project that matched people who wanted to grow food but had nowhere to do it with people who had unused or underused gardens around the town. It was a brilliantly simple initiative, and above all a practical one that was getting a great response' – *The Transition Companion*, Hopkins (2011 p.12). There is a clear resonance here with the ministry of Jesus in the Gospels, where he preached and healed within local situations, yet also at the same time he reached out beyond family and friends – 'to the one who asks from you, give...' (Luke 6, 30). Thus motivated, there appeared communities of solidarity and mutual caring in the early church (Acts 2, 43,44).

The parallel between Christianity and Transition can be discerned in the word 'biotic' – a term brought to the writer's attention by an American correspondent Daniel Deffenbaugh. In *Learning the Language of the Fields: Tilling and Keeping as a Christian Vocation* (2006), Deffenbaugh argues: 'Christ is neither cosmic nor particular but a mediation of the two: Christ is a *biotic community* in which meaningful being becomes

incarnate as "being with", that is, as the experience of having entered into mutually-affirming relationships with others who share my life-place.' Thus 'biotic' refers to the integrated functioning of all that lives and moves and has being, inclusive of people as well as environment. The earth on which all living depends is enfolded in the 'biotic community', and is the place where Kingdom and Transition are to happen. The process 'from head, to heart, to hand' expresses 'biotic community' in practice. Ellen Davis in *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture: an Agrarian Reading of the Bible* (2009) portrays the divine covenant as a moral economy. Referring to the Old Testament Holiness Code she explains that 'its point of orientation is the web of relationships uniting the various members of the land community: earth animals and humans' (p.90). The implication of the story of Naboth's vineyard is that 'A healthy economy is part of an authentic local culture'. She provides a contemporary illustration from Cedar Grove, a small community in North Carolina. Grieved by rifts in the community:

'A lifelong member of the community, a woman whose grandfather had been born into slavery, offered five acres of land to Cedar Grove United Methodist for the purpose of planting a community vegetable garden. Now Asians, Mexicans, Hondurans, African and European Americans, Christians and non-Christians, poor and relatively rich, work that land together, and have weekly dinners on the ground. The older farmers contribute their local knowledge and their manure – things that no one had seemed to value before. The food

goes to those who need it most ... A community that a few years ago was riven by fear is now growing in trust and joy' (p.118).

The Church Dimension

Here Rob Hopkins makes a point strongly felt by many: 'It seems clear that a great deal of damage and wounding has gone on in the world in the name of organised religions, and of spirituality in general, and so some people are very wary indeed about the whole issue', though he goes on to say 'it is perhaps necessary that no one in any sense "pushes" his or her spiritual approach, but, equally, this whole area of human experience is not unwelcome.' (op.cit. p.141). So there is an opportunity here if members of Churches can set light to "'the Church" as structure, ministers, orientation' ... and remember that 'we are the prophetic presence of the living and risen Jesus Christ' Echlin (2010 p.106).

Transition in Practice

Ashton Hayes, a village of 1,000 people near Chester, where action was started by the Low Carbon Communities Network, gave this information on its webpage:

The pub has been the meeting place for many of our team meetings and in recent years all the landlords have been very supportive of the project and are keen to welcome visitors. Initially the brainchild of local resident Garry Charnock, the project was adopted by the Parish Council in November 2005, and officially launched at a public meeting held in Ashton Hayes Primary School on 26th January 2006. The launch meeting was a huge success, attended by 400 people. Awareness-raising with residents has cut the carbon footprint of the village's households by 20% in 12 months. Tree planting is helping to offset remaining emissions.
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Yes, prophets have always warned, "There will be Blood"... but the blood of God's cosmic Covenant leads from death to life

The Transition movement demonstrates a theological vision in another sense: its character is shaped

allied to Christ's mission on earth as portrayed in the Gospels, enunciates a deep-rooted sense of divine providence. This still underpins particularly the mindset of those who have grown up in the countryside. The writer remembers a farmer in the parish whom he knew on the school governors committee – not a person who attended Church – saying after a difficult summer: 'you know, vicar, seedtime and harvest shall not fail'. Through imaginative projects, this traditional sense of provision and redeeming can meld with the altruistic, community-orientated purposes seen in Transition projects and Low Carbon Communities.

Believing and Behaving Hopefully

Transition initiatives are succeeding because of their underlying ethic of collaboration, persons in relationship, which enables the local outworking of carbon footprint reduction to take off. What the Transition movement promotes is a wellbeing that lies in a vibrancy of place, and of life-styles and methods of local economy which both respect the actual environment, and also epitomise the action which is required on a global scale. From this perspective, supra-local and supra-national agencies have a role as enablers, not as exploiters.

by its future vision. The world of the 21st century, according to many respected observers, has reached a critical juncture, where 'business as usual' could end in the partial destruction of civilisation in many places – and where 2030 will be the 'Age of Stupid', a catastrophic judgement on short-term self-seeking, because the warning signs were resisted. Of course the Transition programme cannot be equated directly with the inauguration of the Kingdom. It has a this-worldly focus without a transcendental salvation. However, more and more people caught up in the Transition movement realise that material welfare alone 'is not it' – as the Alpha Course poster puts it. Such people, while not ignoring the

complexity of the issues, have driving convictions, and they are attuned to the realities of the environmental situation both globally and locally. They demonstrate a sensitive and caring listening to 'the other', be that human or natural, which those of faith would see as spiritual qualities. Many thoughtful Christians are among them, as an identifying of the personnel involved in the current Food Banks in urban centres will reveal.

The word covenant, voiced by political leaders striving for a Climate Change consensus between nation states, implies a theology of hope, which indicates that this world's relationship with God will in the end not be sundered by any catastrophe, human or natural. Yes, as prophets have always warned, *There will be Blood* – title of the recent film in which Daniel Day-Lewis stars as the American oil developer confronted by the local preacher – but the blood of God's cosmic Covenant, celebrated at every Lord's Supper, leads from death to life. Theologically-speaking the Transition movement shows that in some form 'Kingdom come' really is hope in these uncertain times. ■

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From a theological perspective, the underlying narrative of the Hebraic Covenant with the whole creation, when