

# 'MISSION-SHAPED' MUSIC

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While on holiday a few years ago, I heard about an 'Elvis Presley' service going on in Truro cathedral one Sunday evening. Out of curiosity I turned up ten minutes before, thinking that there wouldn't be that many people there. In fact, the buzz of excited conversation reached me well before I got to the West door, and when I entered, the cathedral was packed. Perran Gay, the precentor, had recruited a local 'Elvis' to sing some of his spiritual songs and had weaved them together with reflections, readings and prayers. I, with my classical background, came with a certain amount of bemused scepticism, but it proved a thoroughly enjoyable and moving experience, especially as I was told that most of the enormous crowd were non-churchgoers.

We are surrounded by a music-obsessed society where many define themselves by identifying with particular musical genres as part of fashion and lifestyle choices.

Not long after, at our Diocesan Music Day in Exeter Cathedral, we had some workshops on Jazz and Gospel music presented by Scott Stroman, one-time Professor of Jazz at the Guildhall School of Music in London. This led to the cathedral choir singing Scott's Jazz Mass in the main Sunday morning Eucharist the next day, with a significant swelling of the normal congregation by many who had an interest in jazz, of whom quite

a few were non-churchgoers. Since then we have included a jazz feature several times in Nightchurch, the cathedral's 'fresh expression' on a Friday evening, and seen its potential to attract a different audience. Meanwhile, some friends attended a performance of Bach's St John Passion at the Festival Hall a couple of months ago. They were struck by the reverent and spiritual attitude of performers and audience alike, even though it was not in a religious building, nor billed as a religious event.

These examples show something of the enormous power different kinds of music have to mediate spiritual experience for varied groups of people. Music is a language which communicates on a deep and often subliminal level, with a unique ability to trigger powerful emotions and convey significant cultural messages. This is why it can be such an emotive element within church life and worship. People feel deeply about the kind of musical style on offer because it says something about who they are – their churchmanship, age profile, cultural background and values.

Of course, this isn't just happening within church circles. We are surrounded by a music-obsessed society where many define themselves by identifying with particular musical genres as part of fashion and lifestyle choices. If we have a desire to reach out to this society then we in the Church will need to become much more aware of the musical messages that we are communicating about ourselves, whenever and however we use music.

One of the striking parts of 'Mission-shaped church', the C of E report of 2004 (see information *opposite*), was its pie chart. Based on research, it divided the population into 10% 'regulars' (people

## MISSION-SHAPED CHURCH

*Mission-shaped church* was a report originally written for the General Synod in 2004. It was quickly recognized as being very influential, challenging the church to take a hard look at itself in the 21st century. 22,000 copies have been sold to date.

Archbishop Rowan Williams has stressed the need for both traditional models and fresh expressions of worship. To be mission-shaped we don't need to abandon the best of our traditions, but we might need to offer a wider diet of music and worship styles to our communities.

There has been a whole series of offshoots to help churches get to grips with the report's ideas and implications, but sadly, as yet, no single book called 'Mission-shaped music'.

→ *Mission-shaped church: church planting and fresh expressions of church in a changing context* is published by Church House Publishing (2004) and available to download at [www.cofe.anglican.org/info/papers/mission\\_shaped\\_church.pdf](http://www.cofe.anglican.org/info/papers/mission_shaped_church.pdf)

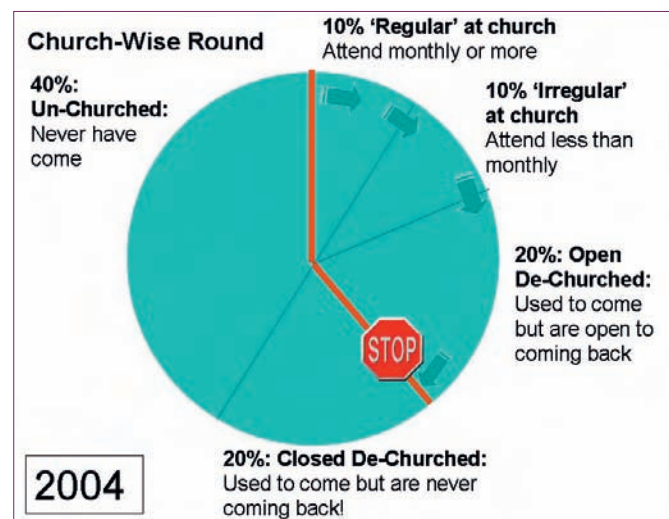
who attended church at least monthly), 10% 'fringe' (people who attended less than monthly), 20% 'open de-churched' (people who once attended, and might come again), 20% 'closed de-churched' (people who once attended, but definitely won't come again), and 40% 'non-churched' (people who basically have no church background or connection at all, which might be up to 80% in some urban areas). As if this wasn't bad enough, it went on to reveal a demographic time-bomb ticking away underneath all the churches in 21st-century Britain – 20 years hence the proportion of 'regular', 'fringe' and 'open de-churched' people would have shrunk to 10% altogether, while the 'non-churched' would have increased to a massive 60% of the population. If we are only relying on a 'returners' strategy (young people will one day come back to church, perhaps when they are older and wiser, or perhaps when they have young families of their own), i.e. moving 'church-wise' round the chart, then we will eventually reach a dead end.

Such statistics are alarming (bearing in mind that we are now in 2009) and affect everyone, including church musicians. We just cannot continue insulating ourselves by keeping our heads down and getting on with the music as if nothing is changing. As part of the mission strategy of the Church, we must become much more aware of what our use of music is communicating. It is inevitably saying something about the authenticity of our experience of God, our sense of being bound together as a community, the

particular values we hold, and whether we have any concern for those outside at all. Where young people are concerned, music has an even more powerful influence. They use it as the soundtrack to their lives and, if the music is not to their taste, they are very unlikely to stop long enough to listen to the message. I know this presents major difficulties for a lot of churches where congregations, and the musicians who serve them, are of another age and another culture, but there is too much at stake just to give up and stick where we are.

Could we be more imaginative in our use of music? When people come into church, what would it be like to be playing the 'Officium' CD by the Hilliard Ensemble, that brilliant combination of choral polyphony and saxophone, or some beautiful and prayerful plainsong? If it's a younger audience, how would a bit of Coldplay go down? And if you're beginning to react to these suggestions, just think for a minute how other people feel about what is for them an incomprehensible addiction to hymns and organ music. These days, if you want to share your views or beliefs with someone, you must first listen to them; then they might be willing to listen to you. Playing their music is a good place to start.

One of the issues of the 'Mission-shaped church' report was that we have become far too inward focused as churches, sucking people into churchy activities and thus preventing them becoming active and involved in their local non-church communities. Church music easily becomes one of those black holes, and many of us will know how much energy and commitment it takes. Unfortunately it can produce a Dead Sea syndrome – everything comes in, but nothing goes out. One senses



a mood among many within the Church today to get much more involved in wider issues and break out of the ghettos we have made for ourselves. We might well find our regular worship rejuvenated if we could begin to change our perspective to serve the wider community, and in this, music could have a very significant role.

You may have noticed the rise of interest in community singing and choirs, recently mirrored in such TV programmes as 'The Choir' and 'Last Choir Standing'. Over the last couple of years, a Christian friend has found himself involved in using music to serve the wider community in just this way. Initially he was asked to lead a male voice choir which started quite spontaneously in the local pub, and then had the idea of starting a community choir in the local area. Currently 100 people turn up every week, many of whom can't read music and have never been in a choir before. The material is basic but fun, and they use quite a lot of Christian music, whether World Church songs or Gospel pieces. Moreover, members are improving their musical skills all the time. People come for two things in particular – the inspiration

#### KEYNOTE TRUST

Andrew Maries works through Keynote Trust to stimulate and encourage thinking about worship, mission and music across the denominations and church traditions.

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#### OTHER LINKS

[www.freshexpressions.org.uk](http://www.freshexpressions.org.uk)

[www.transformingworship.co.uk](http://www.transformingworship.co.uk)

and uplift that singing gives, and the sense of community that comes from being together.

That sounds to me very close to what church is meant to be all about – to encounter the spiritual in worship and to be joined together in the Body of Christ. Why then, do all these people come every week to a secular hall on a Monday evening, while the congregation at the local parish church is so small? I'm sure there are many reasons, but it is interesting that music is common to both. The contrast is so striking that it challenges all of us in church life to ask the question.

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