

The Centre for Cultural Witness

We are at a moment where there is little common vision for the future of western societies, the political landscape is shifting, and the cultural future is very uncertain. It is therefore a moment where a confident affirmation and confession of the Christian gospel is more needed than ever. This issue of commending the faith in wider public discourse and building confidence in the theological and intellectual sturdiness of the faith among lay Christians will be vital to enable the church to retain and develop a lively witness in these challenging times.

The emerging vision for the Church of England envisages the church becoming younger and more diverse, having a mixed ecology of church and to grow missionary disciples. We emphasise everyday faith, evangelism, worship and pastoral care. However, to fulfil all these aspirations, also requires a serious attempt to tell the Christian story more pro-actively in public, and to defend and proclaim that faith intelligently and imaginatively in our current climate. While public media tends to listen to the Church when it speaks on political issues or engages in social action, it has been harder to get much hearing in public discourse for the heart of the church's core message centred on Jesus Christ, and the creative, imaginative culture-shaping power of the Christian gospel. We need a serious engagement with a kind of broad cultural witness that underpins the Church's evangelistic and church-building efforts and aims to transform the public narrative about Christian faith.

This paper outlines a project, to be based at Lambeth Palace in partnership with some prominent UK Theology Faculties. It aims at two main aspirations:

1. The development of a broad intellectual and imaginative cultural climate more conducive to the spreading of the Christian gospel and which highlights the resources Christian faith brings to the shaping of culture.
2. Building both an appetite and resources within the Church for such cultural engagement

The project would have a number of more specific goals in mind:

- **Building the confidence** of lay and ordained Christians in the gospel by enabling them to see the deep coherence and satisfying nature of the Christian faith.
- **Displaying the intelligibility** of Christianity, its capacity to engage the realities of human experience, and the traces of grace and transcendence in wider culture
- **Showing the intellectual and spiritual resources of Christian faith** to offer a coherent, constructive and compelling critique of some aspects of contemporary culture(s)
- **Countering misunderstandings** of the Christian faith
- **Developing and training** a cadre of younger apologists for the faith
- **Fostering church unity** by gathering around the common task of commending the gospel.

The project would aim to speak from the deeper 'generous orthodoxy' that underlies our different traditions and expressions of Christianity in worldwide Christianity. It would seek to engage the imagination and demonstrate the deep coherence and satisfying nature of the Christian faith, as well as its capacity to illuminate and interpret the realities and diversity of human experience, including social and political issues. It is rooted in the Anglican church, yet does not seek to be narrowly Anglican, rather fully ecumenical and international, embracing a wide range of Christian voices within that generous orthodoxy. It also seeks to embrace voices from across the world (especially the global Anglican Communion) showing the trans-cultural nature of the Christian faith, and stories of Christian life, persecution and growth across the world.

The project would focus on the following three key areas:

1. COMMUNICATION:

The main outward focussed aspect of the project would be a high quality 'magazine' style website (think [Spectator](#) / [Unherd](#) / [New Statesman](#)). Its focus would not be on internal church debates, but be outward-focussed, addressed either to the interested observer or enquirer about Christian faith, or the Christian seeking to understand their faith better for the purpose of sharing it. It would aim to be the 'go-to place' for fresh, thoughtful Christian comment on the issues of the day, aiming to improve general understanding of the Christian faith but also how the world looks when viewed through the lens of the Christian gospel. It would look to generate at least 50,000 subscribers over the initial 4 years of the project. This would include daily articles – around 10 new articles a week, short films, audio & video podcasts etc. the key themes would be:

- CREED – building Christian literacy with material explaining key Christian doctrines, thinkers, influential books, paintings, architecture etc.
- CULTURE – reflecting on broader aspects of contemporary culture and how they look when seen through the lens of the Christian gospel
- COMMENT – immediate comment on the political and social issues of the day
- CHARACTER – stories of the impact of Christian faith on individuals and communities in the UK and around the world

It would aim to develop a range of both regular and occasional contributors, both well-known names and younger, more diverse voices. It would seek to harness much of the theological work going on in universities and elsewhere and enable it to find a more accessible and outward-focussed voice.

2. LEARNING

- Drawing together prominent Christian leaders (e.g MPs, Bishops, community leaders etc.) with academic theologians and media experts to help develop the church's voice in public, both lay and ordained. Lambeth Palace's proximity to the Houses of Parliament makes this both attractive and possible.
- A network of Christian academics in different disciplines, who are committed to the task of cultural witness & inter-disciplinary seminars between theologians, academics and cultural commentators to explore apologetic dimensions of this interaction.
- Developing and supporting a network of emerging younger communicators who can communicate wisely about Christian faith, giving training and a platform for their contribution.

3. RESEARCH

A research strand would aim at both dedicated research into the changing nature of culture and communication and what this means for a new vision of witness in the post-Christian, and even 'post-truth' world. This would examine how to re-think the vital notion of *apologia* so it aligns more with the category of 'witness' than a rationalist approach to winning arguments with sceptics. It would produce consultations, research and publications that explore new forms of apologetics and Cultural Witness as well as what can be learnt from the past in this discipline.

Setting

The Centre will be based in Lambeth Palace, which has offered free office space, using the resources of the new Lambeth Library and enabling the library to be seen as a stimulus for renewed engagement of the Christian faith with wider culture, while bearing in mind the wider ecumenical embrace of the project. It will not be an official channel for Church of England communication, but have its own editorial independence. A partnership with the Faculties of Theology in Cambridge and Oxford Universities is also at an advanced stage of discussion.

Funding

This would initially be a 4-year project, recruiting a team to run the project, with an estimated cost of around £2.2m. Over £1.4m has already been pledged, and more funding is being sought to complete the budget.

+Graham Tomlin, Bishop of Kensington