THEY DO IT DIFFERENTLY THERE (AND THEN)

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Category: Church: World

When you read the book of Acts a number of things stand out. One of them is that the Apostolic church was more or less nothing like our experience of church today. From the way they conducted meetings, through their communal life to their pattern of mission, the early church did things differently to us.

Now that's not a problem; the book of Acts doesn't set out to give us a description of how churches should run their affairs. It gives principles and guidelines that we can build on, but it doesn't give a recipe.

This is just as well, because at every point in history and across the world, people have lived out the Christian life in different ways. If you look at the medieval church in Europe, the contemporary church in Africa or the church in India, you will see very different expressions of Christian life and community. Indeed, if you compare much church life in the UK with how things were in, say, the 1970s you will see huge changes.

This is all good, because the societies that the Church finds itself living in and witnessing to are all very different.Â The church's role is always to confront the wrongs in society and to point people to Jesus, but it must do so from within the society in a framework that can be understood. So different churches in different places and at different times do things in different ways.

I think there are three points I'd like to draw out from this.

- Firstly, the church must continually ensure that it is actually challenging society and pointing people to Jesus. It is very easy for a church, in it's desire to communicate to society, to lose the point of what it is communicating and simply to reflect societies values.
- On the other hand, we have to ensure that we are communicating in a way that the society around us can understand. If our lives and words are so out of touch that people can't understand what it is we are communicating, then we have lost the plot.
- Lastly, because different churches do things in different ways, we should be slow to criticise other Christians. There may well be good reasons why their church or denomination does things that weÂ are not comfortable with. Before we criticise, we need to understand.