When *Mission-Shaped Church* was discussed at General Synod in February 2004 it received a generous welcome. Introducing the debate at Synod, the Bishop of Maidstone noted that MSC was not so much new thinking as a report on the various ways in which church was already emerging from a fresh engagement with local culture. It did not attempt to prescribe, but did want to permit and encourage a wide variety of styles of church. This fitted well with the Archbishop of Canterbury’s often quoted statement that the Church must now operate in a ‘mixed economy’. The Archbishop himself commended the report at Synod as a ‘wonderful and comprehensive overview’.

This review isn’t an attempt either to undermine the necessary, imaginative and courageous mission initiatives described in MSC, or to devalue the useful work of reporting and reflecting on it. MSC will rightly lead to a more entrepreneurial culture within the Church. It is, however, an attempt to address some of its argument, in the belief that MSC is in some ways misleading. As a document about ecclesiology, MSC takes some short-cuts which may not help the Church to be in mission in the most potent and sustainable way. While not wanting to stamp on any tender shoots of emerging church, I offer an argument which I hope may help the Church of England maintain its integrity in mission, in the face of so much that fragments and consumes authentic forms of *koinonia*.

**What Culture does MSC Address, and How?**

The greatest contribution that MSC will make to the Church of England will be to win the argument that parish cannot be its only mission strategy, or even, in

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many contexts, its predominant strategy. The report, with its stress on the need for diversity of style and for church to grow out of engagement with local culture, militates against the assumption that inherited forms of church (or indeed forms of mission agency working with inherited forms of church)\(^2\) are sufficient for the purpose. The report was given with assurances that ‘parish’ still had a part to play, but clearly the force of the argument was that it was but one part of an emerging picture of an increasingly diverse church, which precisely because of its diversity of form would be in a better position to meet the needs of contemporary culture.

*Mission-Shaped Church* seeks to address three cultural trends, the first being the shift from neighbourhood to network. The report is a sustained attempt to re-connect with that major part of society which is highly mobile (rather than those who are money poor) by arguing for forms of church which are not based on locality and territory. There is a considerable target to aim at here, given the parochial structure of the Church of England and its heavy investment in congregational life. So the emerging church need not be based in a building or meet on a Sunday but will be defined by its values.

The second trend is that of increasing consumerism. The report is much more critical about this, though it has little to say about how forms of church can stand against it. MSC argues that choice is now the key value, rather than progress. In this culture, everything must fit me exactly, not just consumer goods, but health care, educational provision, patterns of work, relationship and religion.\(^3\) Truth becomes yet another disposable commodity. At worst, this leads to a self-indulgent society where ‘pursuit of pleasure, untarnished by guilt or shame, becomes the new image of the good life’.\(^4\)

The report notes that consumerism excludes the poor and undermines long-term commitments. It leaves the Church with vital questions: how do you embody Church in consumer culture without falling into syncretism? How can we be in culture and not bound by its underlying values? What forms of church do we need? It understands that ‘It is the incarnation of the gospel, within a dominantly consumer society, that provides the Church of England with its major missionary challenge.’\(^5\)

The third trend is the accelerating suspicion of institutional religion in a post-Christendom culture, and a widening gap between the population and the

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1. Both Ian Smith and Paul Boyd-Lee at Synod felt the need to state the case for these agencies as agents in a new era of mission.
3. MSC, p. 10, quoting Gabriel and Lang, *The Unmanageable Consumer*.
4. MSC, p. xiii.