

Why Modality and Sodality thinking is vital to understand future church

The vocabulary of modality and sodality has been around in missiological circles for nearly 40 years, but is not widely known in God's church, even among its pioneers, let alone incisively and strategically applied by denominational authorities. As a result some pioneers are frustrated by the wider Church and some authorities are unnecessarily alarmed by pioneers. Neither values the other as highly as would be helpful and the Church's participation in the mission of God is limited, because the models by which it can happen have been restricted.

Understood aright it is a wonderful tool which works elegantly with the twinned dynamics of continuity and change that are rooted in the Incarnation and Christology. This in turn offers a sound base to understand a similar process that happens in fresh expressions of Church. It also helps explain the impetus by which ecclesial non-identical reproduction and birth of churches occurs. It supports the celebration, and creation, of a deliberate diversity of ways of being church. In addition it resolves the tension of whether mission is to be understood as a 'come' or a 'go' strategy. Furthermore it offers a way to heal the disastrous separation of church and mission, which sadly has been dominant in Protestant thought at least since the 18th century. That's quite a good list, so I commend exploring it more.

It should be admitted immediately that I resisted the language for years, because I did not understand it and found it opaque. The words conveyed almost nothing to me, except my sense of incomprehension. Having been enlightened, they are now a central part of my understanding of mission and church and I deeply regret that the terms are not more accessible. I have thought for some years about how they could be improved, and am open to offers, but all alternatives put so far by others seem only partial or even a step back.¹ Perhaps, like eschatology and perichoresis, or carburettor and limited-slip differential, they are technical language that we have to learn to use if we want subjects to open up to us.

Why these funny words?

Modality comes from the root word *mode*. This in turn refers to the customary way things are done. One might say it is the default position, or prevailing fashion or custom. Mathematically modal is the greatest frequency of occurrences in a given set, and there is a corresponding sense socially that it is the most common way things are.

Sodality comes from the Latin root, *Sodalis*. This can be translated comrade, or using other words, all of which suggest closeness and active partnership: companion, associate, mate, crony, accomplice, conspirator, are all listed. *Sodalitas* was used for social and politics associations; religious fraternities; electioneering gangs (an interesting take on mission); and guilds. Once again a significant sense of belonging is conveyed and some purpose to that belonging. 'Comrade' could be a good word for either the Salvation Army or Church Army contexts, but is not limited to those groups. There is a sense of high commitment and particular purpose.

This helps face down one crude interpretation of a difference between modality and sodality, that the modal is people-centred and the sodal is task-centred. That is not the heart of it as sodal

¹ Two submitted include the following: 'mission by bridge' and 'mission by outpost' is good at differentiating two types of legitimate mission but weak on conveying that both are church. 'Homely' and 'Heroic' is used by some and is good at indicating something of the difference in virtues, but I am aware that some mothers at home are heroic in their sacrifice for their children and some heroic acts are just plain foolish. The terms also do no work on explicit missional and ecclesial identity.

groups are classically, and characteristically, highly committed to one another, although completing a given task is cardinal in sodal identity.

Why use the words around church and mission?

As far as I know, the language was brought into missions thinking by the Protestant missiologist Dr Ralph Winter at an All Asia consultation in Seoul, Korea. 1973. He spoke under a title suited to mission students, *The Two Structures of God's Redemptive Mission*. The eight page text is still downloadable from the web and no strategic leader should be without it.² However, looking back now, the title feels rather organisational and missional, not organic and also ecclesial, which is a pity.

The shape of his lecture explored firstly the complementary roles of the local church, borrowed from synagogue understanding, and that of Paul's mission teams. The first is where all age groups of local Christians gather and second was made of experienced workers who make a characteristic second decision, beyond commitment to the first form of church. Here are the twin structures Winter identifies. Secondly, he sketched how both of them developed in the Roman Empire, as diocesan church and early monastic life with the latter borrowing inspiration from military models, but both being significantly missional. Thirdly, he showed how the Medieval period at its best held a deliberate synthesis of the two, as two forms of one church, but in which the sodal/monastic was the prime mover, the main way, to rebuild and extend the modal/diocesan church, for which he praises Catholic thought and practice. Fourthly he noted the Reformation error that failed to create its own sodalities, which was not remedied until the late 18th century with the Baptist pioneer William Carey or the Anglican CMS society. Yet fifthly, he regrets that these initiatives had to begin independent of modal ecclesiastical structures. In time this solidified into ideological separation; that church was not inherently missional, and mission was not essentially ecclesial. What also occurred, over time, was that historic mission societies became somewhat ossified and too modal, conducting mission but not expecting any fresh sodalities to occur, only planting modality and what turned into a non-missional modality at that. All this necessitated the birth of fresh sodalities, the Faith Missions, like the China Inland Mission, or indeed the earliest years of the Salvation Army, as it emerged out of Methodism.

In summary, Winter brought two key ideas that balance each other.

1. Both the modal and the sodal are structures of God's redemptive mission. It is therefore normal and normative that the modal church has a mission.
2. However also, both the modal and the sodal are Church, but in legitimate different ways. It is therefore normal and normative that the sodal mission is ecclesial.

Lesslie Newbigin had trenchantly expressed this very point further back, in 1952. 'An unchurchly mission is as much a monstrosity as an unmissionary church.'³

Perhaps the key New Testament example that reveals what many people think is to pose this question. When Barnabas & Paul left Antioch, having been called and sent from that church, *what* were they?

The western Protestant answer is 'Missionaries' but that is interpretation, not biblical language. Catholics might answer 'Church leaders exercising an apostolate charism' and I see where they are coming from. Some Anglicans might say, 'I haven't a clue and thank goodness it wasn't me'. Winter's point is they were 'Church in sodality'. Fairness admits that this phrase is not specific biblical vocabulary either, but it makes the point. They did not stop being church just because they were small and mobile.

² Enter 'Winter Modality and Sodality' or the Lecture title to find it.

³ L. Newbigin, *The Household of God*, (London: SCM, 1953) p. 201.

Anglicans may care to reflect on the existence of parishes and missionary societies. Similarly, Salvation Army people may ponder their inherited language of citadels and of outreach units, and which are missional and which are ecclesial and why. All so-called 'para-church' bodies can take note and, I suggest, dare to foreswear this hybrid identity that is hesitant to name itself as truly ecclesial. Those exploring new monasticism may begin to locate themselves as sodal.

Modality and Sodality Characteristics

It is helpful to spot which is which, by their differing characteristics, and so to learn to value both, because it seems God uses both and we need to see how they combine. For clarity I want to begin with two secular parallels, for modal and sodal forms of life are not limited to the church.

In my city of Sheffield, as a citizen I am a modal member of a diverse society of all ages, along with ½ million others. We are the most common and numerous. But Sheffield has sodalities; they include the Fire service and the Police Force. Its members are also citizens, but they have a second calling and resultant equipping to a particular role. They form special bonds of comradeship in those sodal groups. I cannot, however much it might be fun, roll up to the fire station tomorrow and ask to go out to the next call. It doesn't work like that.

In the Military too there are parallels. The bog standard soldiers, the Infantry, hopefully gain and hold ground. But it is the Paratroopers – an elite recruited out of other regiments - who are sent to gain specific objectives. On D Day, many infantry had to make their way up the beaches, but the Paras were dropped in small numbers behind the lines for other detailed purposes. Both were part of the Army; both were needed, but significantly different.

So when it comes to the Church what do the two look like?

Features about where, how and what for

Modal church operates in a settled place – often reflected in the name, like Derby Baptist church, Exeter Methodist Church, Sheffield Cathedral. Sodal church is mobile and deployable. The typical historic structure of modal church is parish and diocese, whereas Sodal church is found in the Monastic Orders and mission societies. The modal task is more to sustain what is, whereas the sodal will grow what isn't yet. Thus the scope of the first is more general, and the second more specific.

Features affecting the two kinds of people

Modal church tends to make minimal demands upon its members, whereas it is characteristic of sodal church to ask for high commitment and for its work to need it. To sustain them, modal church only offers adequate mutual support. For example, modal church can think that Sunday attendance may be sufficient for demands made and support given. Sodal church offers high mutual support through buddy systems, mentoring, coaching and intentional discipleship patterns. And it will asks its people to deploy in demanding and self-supporting roles. There is therefore also a difference about the joining patterns; the modal tends toward the self inclusive; you join if you want to. The sodal is distinctly vocational, a call that will be tested by others, and in that sense it is exclusive. Not everyone can join or should. The debate recorded in Acts about whether John Mark should be in or out of the Pauline band illustrates how this can be contested.

Winter allowed that some forms of being church are not located at polar ends of this spectrum. Some modal groups have some sodal features, in relation to higher demands about membership

criteria and discipleship patterns. However if something is essentially settled and serves all ages, it will still fall into the modal half of the spectrum. It is helpful to note that members of the Franciscan Third Order or Benedictine Oblates display some modal features within a sodal calling.

Dangers and advantages

Among the weaknesses of the modal is the tendency to look inwards and to be too easily satisfied. The dangers of the sodal are quite different: temptations may be to a sense of superiority, and to promote an excessive work ethic. Yet both have positives. The modal can feel safe and stable, values which are good in themselves, whereas the sodal is a call to the risky and exciting.

Understanding these sorts of dynamics enables us to see better that God uses both, we need both, and that there are different responses needed from those in wider leadership for each to work well, and for both to work to mutual advantage. It is then worth teasing out how they combine and in what ways.

Modality and Sodality working together

Making modal and sodal church into partners is in some ways rather like the issue of gender. It is clearly fatal to imagine women are the same as men, or vice versa, as to conclude that because of their differences, which are real, that they cannot combine. Yet the combination must never be to reduce one to being like the other. Here again the delights of diversity, not to mention non-identical reproduction beckon. I do not wish to push the parallel to suggest one gender is sodal and the other modal – that is not true. What is true is that Winter taught that both need the other. It is not good for modal to be alone – one might say.

One dynamic is that Sodality pioneers what Modality then sustains.

It is of interest that in the letter to the Hebrews Jesus is called both the ‘pioneer’ of our faith and an ‘apostle’.⁴ Christ as the supreme missioner, both relating to inherited Judaism and going beyond its existing understanding, clearly has sodal roles. Hence the words Pioneer and Apostle naturally belong here and the example of St Paul is a clear one, not least his avowed intent not to build on others foundations, declared in Romans 15. But beginnings need to be followed through.

So it is also the case that Modality provides resources that enables Sodality to flourish and sustain. In the New Testament, Paul keeps contact with his sending church, returns there to report; he draws fresh members, and sometimes finance, for his sodal teams from the planted modal churches, while firmly insisting there is only one body of Christ. In the Army, the Paras gain strategic objectives that the Infantry then need to reinforce and hold. The bridge at Arnhem, in 1944, is a story that stands as the tragic heroic failure of that doctrine.

Another complementary connection is that **Modality tends to ‘biological church growth’** via the families that make it up. Today we could add principled transfer growth, that is of those moving to an area, but not including those being consumerist about church attendance. By contrast, **Sodality tends to toward ‘conversion church growth’** because its calling is to pioneer, either cross culturally, or to areas within an existing culture where the Christian presence is weak.

Such links are tactical. There are deeper ones, for each tends to produce the other, but they do this in different ways. This is yet another application of the headline that Archbishop Rowan

⁴ See D. Male (ed.) *Pioneers for Life* (Abingdon: BRF, 2011) Ch 2 What makes a pioneer? p. 32.

Williams calls the mixed economy. To say we need both is true, but we need to discern the nature of their asymmetric co-operation if it is to mix well.

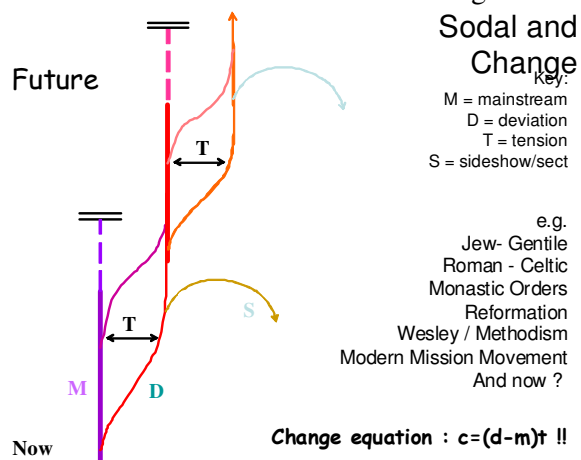
Church as Modal is one breeding ground for unlike Sodal people – for example in the New Testament, Philip and Barnabas arise out of the Jerusalem church. Paul however comes from nowhere and that happens too, with unusual people like John Newton, or Nicky Cruz. All these are examples of obviously non-identical reproduction. **Church as Sodal itself reproduces alike Sodal people**; they catch the charism. Others who have a latent sodal calling are unearthed by contact with sodal people – Paul’s teams are drawn from his planted churches and by association with him. In the medieval period, Francis drew people around him. In the 19th century the same happened with both William Booth and Wilson Carlile – the respective founders of Salvation Army and Church Army. Sodality is in both these founding stories.

It is also true that **Sodal church people assist in the creation of further Modal churches**. It may be a moot point whether it is more accurate to think of them as *midwives* who assist in the birth of fresh expressions of Church, or whether they are invite people to come and join the Christian community that they embody, although in sodal form. Both views have some truth. Here I suspect the detail is stretching the limits of the otherwise helpful interpersonal image of Church.⁵ Clearly what occurs is relational and between persons. What is also characteristic it that **sodal people move on**. If they have done their work well, they will have read their Roland Allen, and so leave behind ways of being sustainable indigenous church that exhibits missional modality, which will in time also create new sodalities. Thus the dynamic cycles between the two will continue, as it seems God intended.

So what?

Disturbance and Change

Firstly Sodality/Modality understanding teaches us to expect a dynamic mission pattern that is intended to include disturbance and change. Visually it looks something like this.



Like many clergy I am interested in railways so such a diagram is to be expected. Out of the modal or mainline, comes a deviation or branch line, which is sodal. It is still very much a railway track and can take traffic, but the direction is fresh. This is what has happened historically. Perhaps the very first example is the evangelist Philip going to Samaria and the trend continued with the work of Barnabas and Paul and the birth of the Gentile church. The diagram endorses that it is vital to hold the tension between the existing modal and the new sodal. The

Council of Jerusalem was where that was tested. Failure to hold it leads to sectarianism and worse to schism and heresy. If the tension is held well then the sodal acts to renew, and thus to change, the life in the modal. Andrew Walls adds the further scary scenario that God does this not just out of missional creativity but because the existing modal church can be sick and is facing future possible extinction.⁶ Those with telescopes on the mainline train can see the buffers down the line. Such was part of the call of Benedict and later of Francis. Have no doubt the pattern repeats. Space here does not permit to tease out Roman/Celtic relations, the missional

⁵ See on the Sheffield website a further document called *Four Paradigms of Church*.

⁶ A Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996) pp. 16-25.

and spiritual contribution of monasticism, the success and failure of the Reformation, the role of Wesley, or the rise of the modern mission movement in the 1790s. What intrigues me is this is where we are again. So we need to understand and accept that disturbance and loving deviation is normal in what sodal brings.

What are those who go out?

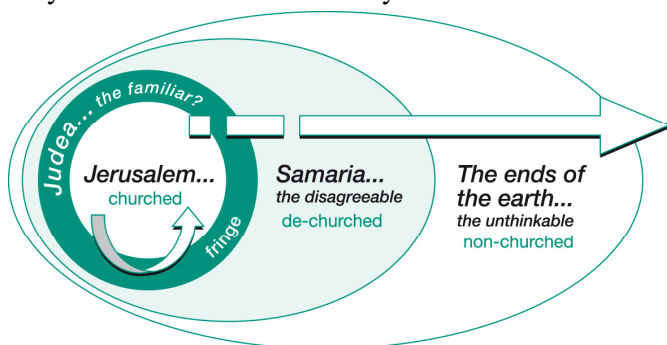
Secondly Winter's insight helps us change our thinking, so that when a team is sent out – even if it is only a couple or small group - we should think that it is church from day one, that they invite others to join. The human interpersonal view of church helps here. We used to think something can only be church when a regular pattern of public worship has been established. But that is thinking based on practices, not interpersonal relational thinking. I am suspicious of the former as it confuses consequences with causes. We need to learn to accept that 'embryonic church' is a meaningful term and learn from the world church that meeting in private or even secret does not stop it being church.

Love the church

Thirdly Winter's thinking urges even the pioneers to change their minds. They need to think as deeply and passionately about the Church as they do about mission. One core element of historic sodal church, which is seen in Paul, Benedict, Francis, Ignatius etc is that they love the church, because Christ does, while working for her to become what she should be and is currently failing to live out. Some who have studied the role of founders insist this love is what makes them valued founders, not just noisy rebels.⁷ One current example of this desire occurs in Frost & Hirsch's book *Re Jesus*.⁸ Its chapter seven lays out Jesus-like qualities of the church they long for, though I regret they do not seem to relate this to sodal and modal thinking.

Connect to Acts 1:8

Fourthly, in my view we should link this insight to the likely title verse of the book of Acts. Acts 1.8 has Jesus connecting the coming of the Spirit with the church's resultant mission to Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, Ends of the earth. However, the next ten chapters show the early church didn't get it and even today this progression is misunderstood as a set of concentric circles, leaving Jerusalem at the centre. The reality, geographically and culturally is that this was only true of the 'Judean Journey' in mission.



As soon as the 'Samaritan Safari' took place, there was a shift away from one centre in an eccentric pattern. The 'Ends of the Earth' expedition for ever disturbed that pattern. But there is more to understand today. This diagram better shows the eccentric nature of mission. It visually displays disturbance, and repudiates the concentric view that can lead to

ecclesiocentric complacency.⁹

Applying such a diagram today there are other virtues. The eccentric pattern reveals to us that it cannot be fundamentally attractional, it must be outgoing and it leads to different shapes to what began it. Not only that, but today there are many more people whose spiritual address as de-churched is more akin to the Samaritans, and even more among the young who, as the non-

⁷ See A. Romano, *The Charism of the Founders* (Slough : St Paul's Press, 1994)

⁸ M. Frost & A. Hirsch, *Re Jesus* (Peabody: Hendrikson, 2009)

⁹ See G. Lings, *Discernment in Mission: Encounters on the Edge* No 30 (Sheffield: Church Army, 2006) p. 18.

churched, are akin to the Ends of the Earth, with no working knowledge of Christianity. It is also characteristic that modal church is best suited to reach its own kind and thus it will tend only to embark on 'Judean journeys.' It will usually be sodal church that begins the mission work where the most people are. Yet the sad irony is that the minority of people we have to deploy are suited to the work needed by the majority of people. Setting the sodalities in our church free is crucial, not merely advisable.

Sodals do church differently

Fifthly, New Testament evidence and recent research shows that modal church needs to affirm and recognize its pioneers as sodal church who should be expected to do things differently. It would be possible to explore the church criticism experienced by Peter after his visit to Cornelius, or Paul's treatment at the hand of Judaisers for biblical warrant. My colleague Beth Keith has recently shown, mainly from Anglican patterns of deployment, that often we are getting it wrong in the way we use pioneers. Those sent to essentially modal contexts, or to do a bit of sodal in the midst of modal, are frustrated by the system, always explaining themselves to authorities, less able to envisage what is needed, and to establish what may nevertheless begin. Those liberated into sodal contexts are free to re-imagine what is needed, glad to be accountable but not controlled, and able to start what is easier to sustain. The Catholic monastic and writer Gerald Arbuckle refers to this need in the axiom 'the new belongs elsewhere'¹⁰ and he charts similar dynamics to those noticed nearly 20 years later by Mrs Keith. There is little point in breeding tigers if you intend to keep them chained up in dog kennels.

A spectrum occurs in both

Sixth and last, I think we need to know what kinds of sodal and modal people we have. I think from watching people that the range from pioneering to traditional ministries [all of which might be lay or ordained] is a wide spectrum. It is too crude to think we just have pioneers and settlers. To the adventurous the word settler is as attractive as mud. To the systems person, pioneers are a nightmare. One step beyond such crude distinctions is to imagine a spectrum. At one end I see two kinds of sodal people. The first are the *pioneer-starters* who are brilliant at initiating things, they are phenomenal networkers, have singular gifts in personal evangelism and could sell fridges to the Inuit. However, they get bored quickly and need to know when to move on, before they begin to destroy what has begun. Then come what I am terming the *pioneer-sustainers* who have a wider range of gifts and the ability to select which are needed. They not only can begin things, but are genuinely interested to see them mature and are secure and wise enough to enable the flourishing of indigenous leadership. Next are some ministers that I call *sustainer-innovators*, who despite being traditionally trained, nevertheless have are gifted to bring to birth new ventures within an existing church. They are excellent at forms of modal mission. And at the far end, there are other ministers, whom I'd label *sustainer-developers*, whose gifts are in the effective maintenance or the slow evolution of the modality that already exists. I believe we need them all. But the term 'pioneer' should be reserved for originators of fresh entities.

In addition to this I see a few whom Beth Keith and I term *pioneer-overseers*. Not only can they begin things but they have a wider view of what is needed and by their skills find they are being used as mentors or gatherers of other pioneers. Having one of those at work with a mission-minded modal bishop figure would be a good step forward. Perhaps the Celtic monastic Bishop was an earlier expression of this role. However, we need clarity to spot each across this variety and to devise different time scales and patterns for each. We have more to learn about spotting the two different sodal types – the starter and the sustainer. I suspect they will need different training content. We also need clarity and wisdom on how to deploy this spectrum of people differently depending on their gifting and calling.

¹⁰ G. Arbuckle, *Refounding the Church* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1993) p. 119 and pp. 149 ff.

Some could be fearful and ask whether their denomination can give to birth to further genuine churches, that fall within that understanding of church and yet which are different because they are fresh and contextual? I therefore end with an image. Suppose I showed you a picture of my wife and myself and put this question. 'What do I our children look like?' Of course you cannot know. However if I then gave you pictures of our three adult children, you would immediately see the related face shapes, the similar noses. If you met them, the personality similarities and difference would be clear but you would never make the mistake of thinking any of them was their father or their mother. Here in the sheer familiarity of family life we see the dynamics of continuity and change, we know we meet non-identical reproduction, and generations of family operate in an interpersonal paradigm. All this is familiar and not essentially threatening.

All of these dynamics, which we recognize in families, are notably similar with generations of Church. The ways these work in practice have light thrown upon them by having an accurate view of sodal and modal church, when both combine and are healthily missional too in their distinct ways.