

Welcome

Introduction

In recent years there have been many reports, articles and books on church growth, all trying to encourage us and enable us to reach out to the community in which we are set, sharing that good news of the Gospel which has been handed down to us. Reports such as *From Anecdote to Evidence*¹, *Mission-shaped Church*², *The Road to Growth*³ and the like all raise some serious questions for us to think about in terms of our mission and ministry. Welcome and integration into the church family I believe are key elements for enabling the church to grow. How we welcome those who come to our churches and help them to find their place within the family of God needs careful thought and an intentionality that we often overlook, in our assumption that we are all good at welcoming people into the church. Whilst this may be true for some, the reality is very different.

A few years ago I was on sabbatical, and being a good vicar and area dean I didn't worship in my church or deanery during my 3 months. I chose instead to go to a church within easy driving distance, but where I wouldn't be known to anyone. On arriving on my first Sunday I followed the steady stream of people to find the main door of the church, walked in through a couple of internal doors and came at last into the church. I could see many people milling about, it was to be a service with the uniformed organisations on Parade, so there was a fair bit going on, and amidst the sea of people gathering I was not seen. It was a congregation of about 70, so not small, but one where most people would know one another, yet the sides-people didn't see me, I ended up getting my own hymn book and service book and then found a place to sit. Being a good Anglican it was near the back. With two ways into the row of chairs I decided to sit somewhere in the middle to allow others to sit down at either side of me with ease - which they did; one on my left and another a few minutes later on my right. After a short while the man on my right leaned over, at first I thought to say hello, but I was mistaken. He ended up leaning in front of me to talk to the lady on my left. At which point I nearly got up and walked out, for not only had the man not said hello, but had rudely leaned over me to speak to the lady on my left without even an "excuse me". It wasn't until the first hymn had started that the lady on my left said hello and introduced herself (that was at least 10 minutes). Needless to say I didn't feel very welcomed, but this experience made me wonder about my own church. When my sabbatical had ended I looked at our front of house with different eyes, and discovered that as much as we might say we are a welcoming church we needed to be more intentional in our approach to actually be a welcoming church.

Every church is different, a congregation of 30 will approach this area of ministry in a different way than a congregation of 300, but there are some common principles to think about. If we want to see our churches grow we need to spend some time thinking about who we are, the community in which we are set, how we welcome people and how people might connect with what we are about.

Society today can be described as individualistic, and consumer orientated. I'm not making any value judgement here, it is just an observation of who we are in 21st century Britain. This is important to be aware of, as people today approach the church with one basic question: "What's in it for me?" This is a brilliant place for us to engage with people - after all don't we believe that we have the best news ever to share with people, that through faith in Jesus Christ we find life in all its fullness, freely given to us by God our heavenly Father, empowered by the Holy Spirit to be the people God made us to be? It is a gift that answers the question, but as a church we must enable the enquirer to hear that Good News through our welcome and nurture of them.

¹Church Growth Research Programme, The Church Commissioners for England, 2014

² Archbishops Council, Church House Publishing 2004

³ Bob Jackson, published 2005 by Church House Publishing

The following bible study sessions are designed to help your church leadership and/or members think through some key questions around the ministry of welcome and what we can do to help people as they journey to faith. They don't hold a magic key, rather they are designed to help you think through the issues and come up with some answers that work for your community. There are 5 seasons, best used over a period of 5 weeks, but could be used by a PCC for an away day with some local tweaking.

How you use the material is up to you, but if you would find some direction useful it would be worth starting with prayer. Read the passages in whatever way you wish, but I would encourage each member to say one thing about a verse that stood out for them. Space for silence and reflection between reading the passages can also be helpful; but do whatever works for your group.

There is also a presentation I put together to help my church establish a welcome team. Please feel free to use it, and change any slides you wish. The welcome process and welcome cards are also available for you to adapt and use.

This material is free to you use, but if you would like to make a small donation to the ministry at St. Matthew and St. Luke Chadderton we would be very grateful. Please do so via our website: www.stmatthew-stlukechadderton.org.uk

I hope the material is both helpful and enjoyable.

Revd David Penny

Vicar of St. Matthew and St. Luke, Chadderton &
Area Dean of Oldham West

Bible Studies

Reaching out

Bible Reading: Acts 8.26-38; Acts 17.16-31; Matthew 28.16-end

The readings from Acts have something in common which is vital for us to understand when we reach out into the community with the Gospel: we must start from where people are. The Ethiopian official knew his scripture, but couldn't understand what it was about. The passage from Isaiah was the perfect introduction for Philip to talk about Jesus, and he takes the Ethiopian eunuch from scripture he knew into new things that led to his conversion and baptism. Similarly, whilst Paul is in Athens he uses the things around him to start talking about Jesus. The temple to the Unknown God was a perfect springboard to start talking about the God who makes himself known to us personally in Jesus Christ.

When it comes to reaching out with the Gospel I had to include *The Great Commission*. Whether or not it was part of the original text is of little importance; Jesus on several occasions is recorded as sending the disciples out with the mission of proclaiming the kingdom of God. This passage is a reminder of the reason for us being "The Church". As Archbishop William Temple famously said: "The Church is the only society that exists for the benefit of those who are not its members." Yet how easy it is to move away from that commission and develop an inward focus to our life as the church, especially as we struggle to keep the building in good order and pay all our bills.

Added to this is the change that new church members bring. The very fact that someone new comes to church means we have to change to accommodate them - even if we don't perceive a change it has happened - our church has grown by another person joining us, bringing their own particular needs, gifts and presence. Most of us, if we are honest prefer stability. We feel secure in familiarity. Yet change is going on all the time. Most of the time we just need to make minor adjustments to facilitate change, but occasionally we need to make significant changes as we seek to be an organisation that exists primarily for non-members.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- 1) How would we define our community/parish? What are the key features or aspects of the area in which the church is called to serve?
- 2) How can we be flexible and responsive to the needs and expectations of the community in which we are set? What are the needs of our community?
- 2) Jesus put other people's needs before his own; what changes might we have to make to put non-believers first? What changes do we fear most? What changes would we welcome?

CONCLUDING REFLECTION:

Genesis 12.1-3

The Lord said to Abram, "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing.....and all the people on earth will be blessed through you." (NIV)

Lord God,
you set your people apart that they may be a blessing to the nations;
help us as we reach out with the Good News of the Gospel
to be a blessing to this community.
May the light of the glorious Gospel of Christ
bring hope, joy and peace to all around us;
through Christ our Lord.
Amen

Community & Commonality

Bible Reading: Revelation 3.14 - end; Matthew 5.13; Luke 13.20-21

Any of the seven churches could be used as the bible study for this section, and countless of St. Paul's letters to the churches; but the aim here is to reflect on who we are as a church, and how we interact with the community in which we are set. The church in Laodicea had it's own idea of how it was fairing, and John is fairly harsh in his warnings to them. A community of wealth built on fine cloth and eye salve have their riches, cloth and ointments used to tell them how poor, naked and blind they are. The sense of church and community, where they overlap and inform one another's life is important. If we are to be authentic and a real Christian presence then we must understand our community, and as the church in Laodicea is warned, have a positive influence.

The use of salt and yeast in cooking is well known to us. In the right quantities they are both needed in bread making. As a church we are called to be salt and yeast, but what does that mean to us? How can we truly make a difference to our community? Like any recipe we need to understand the ingredients and how they interact with one another.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- 1) How would we define our church community?
- 2) Where do people connect with one another today? (Online, community centre, pub, school, church?)
- 3) What do we hold in common with those on the edge of the church community?
- 4) How has our church community changed in living memory?
- 5) What difference can we make to the community through living the values of the Gospel?

CONCLUDING REFLECTION:

Christ has no body now but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which he looks with compassion on this world. Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good. Yours are the hands through which he blesses all the world. Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, yours are the eyes, you are his body. Christ has no body now on earth but yours.

Teresa of Avila

Lord God,
you call us to be like salt to our community,
and to enable your kingdom to grow.
Help us to understand the context and community in which our church is set;
to connect with one another;
and to make your kingdom a lived reality;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

Welcome - part 1

Bible Reading: Luke 15.11-end; 1Peter 4.9-10;

The nature and quality of the welcome received will determine what people who walk through our church doors for the first time one day will do next week - will they come back, try somewhere else or stay at home? The first letter of Peter touches on this: "Offer hospitality to one another....." but it seems the early church suffered as much as we can as Peter adds "without grumbling." From my childhood days I remember a framed saying in the family home that said: "A good host makes a guest feel at home; a good guest remembers that it isn't." There is a truth here in that we are called to be good hosts, but the paradox is that we are welcoming people into a family for which in one sense they are already a member. Recognising that everyone is a child of God changes the dynamic of our welcome because we are not welcoming strangers (although that person might be unknown to us) we are welcoming brothers and sisters in Christ.

An aspect of welcome that we can overlook is the accessibility of the services we hold. 10.30am on a Sunday may not be the service that works for everyone. The services we hold might not be accessible to people in the way we think they are. I was once organising cover during the summer holidays, and is often the case these days it was difficult to find a priest to take the main service, so I asked a visiting minister to preside at an 8.30am Holy Communion service and my Reader to take a Service of the Word at 10.30am (the main service of the week - as it was then). On hearing my plan, one member of the PCC said, "why can't we have Mattins instead?". I tried to explain that the service of the word was like Mattins, but more accessible to the majority of the congregation who hadn't been brought up on the Book of Common Prayer. His response was: "Well, they should learn it!" We had a Service of the Word. Whilst this might be an extreme example it does highlight an important point: If we are to be good hosts and make people feel at home what do we need to do practically *and* liturgically to truly put people at ease and make them feel comfortable? Fresh Expressions of Church are a good example of how we might do things differently⁴ but they aren't the only answer. A blended economy of services gives a breadth and depth to authentic worship and discipleship which is bringing growth, both spiritual and numerical, which is relevant to the local context. But setting out on this uncertain path can be a challenge as well as a joy.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- 1) What do we call those who are new to our churches? Guest/Visitor/Newcomer/First Timer/ Outsider? How might that affect how we feel and behave?
- 2) What might we need to do to accommodate people who are new to church? (New services, adapt what we do?)
- 3) What was the best welcome you have ever had? What made it so special? And how could those good experiences be translated into the church context?
- 4) How do we define authentic church? (Sunday morning?) And what excites us and scares us about Fresh Expressions?

CONCLUDING REFLECTION:

⁴ An analysis of fresh expression of Church and church plants begun in the period 1992-2012, *Church Army's Research Unit, 2013*

Hebrews 13.1-2

Keep on loving each other as brothers. Don't forget to entertain strangers, for by doing so some people have entertained angels without knowing it. (NIV)

Lord God,

You welcome us into your family with forgiveness, compassion and love;
help and guide us in our ministry of welcome,
that we may welcome everyone with open arms
and loving hearts;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Welcome - part 2

Bible Reading: John 1.43-end; Acts 2.14-end;

Jesus' call of Philip is a good illustration of how evangelism works best - through personal contact. Jesus calls Philip, then Philip finds Nathanael and makes the invitation personal. Whilst it is true that some people will have a Damascus Road conversion like St. Paul, most of us are like Nathanael, we come to faith through personal invitation; through relationships developed and a growing awareness of the wonderful things God has in store for us.

At the beginning of the book of Acts we see the followers of Jesus establishing a new community. It is difficult to tell from the first few chapters how intentional this was, after all, the first converts were still very much part of the Jewish faith. It wasn't until later that an intentional spilt occurred. But here in the first few chapters of Acts the followers of Jesus are beginning to identify themselves as something different. They form a new community, people came to faith and the church grew.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- 1) Think back to when you first came to church; what, or who, brought you? What enabled you to stay and become part of the church family?
- 2) Think back over your faith journey. How have you been enabled to grow in faith?
- 3) Thinking back over the last 3 sessions, how does the church currently welcome those who are new to church?
- 4) How could we do things differently?

CONCLUDING REFLECTION:

Love bade me welcome: yet my soul drew back,
 Guiltie of dust and sinne.
But quick-ey'd Love, observing me grow slack
 From my first entrance in,
Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning,
 If I lack'd any thing.

A guest, I answer'd, worthy to be here:
Love said, You shall be he.
I the unkinde, ungratefull? Ah my deare,
I cannot look on thee.
Love took my hand, and smiling did reply,
Who made the eyes but I?

Truth Lord, but I have marr'd them: let my shame
Go where it doth deserve.
And know you not, sayes Love, who bore the blame?
My deare, then I will serve.
You must sit down, sayes Love, and taste my meat:
So I did sit and eat.

George Herbert (*The Temple*, 1633)

Lord God,
in your love you forever draw us to yourself;
help us, through our friendships to encourage one another
and build up the body of your church;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

Connecting

Bible Reading: John 15.1-8; Romans 11.13-24; 1Corinthians 12.12-end

“I am the vine; you are the branches” (NIV) - no clearer reminder could be given about the importance of connectedness. The image is well known in terms of how the life of a Christian can only be sustained and have an effective life/ministry by remaining connected to Christ. This is the only way in which we can bear fruit; and like a vine, there are times when we need pruning in order to bear healthy fruit.

St. Paul uses the imagery of grafting so that all can be connected to God's life-giving spirit, reminding the church that both Jews and Gentiles are all part of the same tree. Connectedness to God and connectedness to one another is something we cannot overlook. In that connectedness we recognise how together, with all our differences we work together for the kingdom of God.

To help us think about connectedness we must recognise what type of people a church is made up of. In essence a church (like any other group) is made up of like minded people who meet together regularly. People tend to stay because they feel a connection, hold the same values, or have the same concerns. Once connected to the church, growth takes place over time. More about the faith is learnt, more of God is experienced, and people's gifts and talents are drawn into the life of the church. The sense of being connected to the church has to be a two way thing; it's not just about how the church can feed the life of the person, but how the person can feed the life of the church. Going back to the gospel of John and Paul's letter to the Romans, a vine or tree is sustained by each leaf as well as being fed by the roots. For people to stay within a faith community, whether they are new to the faith or have been a member of church for a long time, there has to be something that connects them.

How people are enabled to connect to your church is for you to work out, dependent on the community in which you are set. In general terms though, each faith community will already have many ways in which this can happen: the church choir; children and youth ministry; church organisations and interest groups. There will of course be a whole host of things that you don't do as a church, and that is fine. It is better to do a few things well, and let other church communities do that which you can't do (to push the analogy of the vine further, a vine can produce lovely grapes, but you wouldn't expect to get oranges and apples from it too) - but you may have identified a gap that you can fill, a need in your community that you could meet.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1) Having reached out with the gospel invitation and welcomed people into our faith community, how do we help people make a connection with God, and connect with the church family, so that their faith can grow and bear fruit?
- 2) What are the natural groupings in our church, and how do they enable people to connect?
- 3) What are the things (church based and society based) that hinder growth?
- 4) How can we enable friendship and a sense of belonging to grow?

CONCLUDING REFLECTION

1 God be gracious to us and bless us
and make his face to shine upon us,

2 That your way may be known upon earth,
your saving power among all nations.

3 *Let the peoples praise you, O God;
let all the peoples praise you.*

4 O let the nations rejoice and be glad,
for you will judge the peoples righteously
and govern the nations upon earth.

5 *Let the peoples praise you, O God;
let all the peoples praise you.*

6 Then shall the earth bring forth her increase,
and God, our own God, will bless us.

7 God will bless us,
and all the ends of the earth shall fear him.

Lord God,
you are the source of light and life,
in you we live and move and have our being;
help us to remain connected to you,
and may we enable others to connect to you,
that we may grow together in faith,
and be a blessing to world around us;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

Welcome Process

The process of someone coming to church for the first time to becoming a committed Christian is varied and complex. For each parish it will be different; as it will be different for each person who comes to faith. However, this does not absolve us from doing any thinking about the process, and doing all we can to enable people to connect with God.

Below is a map that I have used to help the church think about the whole process from first to last. I put it together to help us see where there were any weak or broken links in the chain, especially around the most common areas of contact with people.

St. Matthew and St. Luke has a large number of people who come to us because of their children; a reasonable number who come here for weddings; and some who come because of the church that we are. So varied reasons, but, what we hope for all who walk through our doors for the first time or the thousandth time, is that they find God.

The map may look complicated, but the colour coding should help. The black arrows are for all, blue for those who come for baptisms, yellow for Sunday School, green for those adults who come because they are new to faith, new to the area or are coming back to church, and red for those coming because of their wedding.

Sometimes the path way has a couple of options, and near the end of the baptism line it splits so that the child's line turns yellow and links to Sunday School and the parent's line stays blue linking them to the subgroup box or enquires/confirmation course box.

The task though, is yours to do not copy - this is just to give an idea. It would also be helpful to do the welcome audit; there are several online to download and get your PCC thinking.

Welcome Process

