

An investigation of how the church should be adapting its mission strategies and worship practices to the cultural landscape and spiritual journeys of the residents of York.

by Sue Wallace - 22nd June 2006

Introduction

The reason that I decided to undertake this research is that, ultimately I consider the question of the adaptation of the mission and worship of the church to engage the people around it, to be one of the most important questions that the church is facing in recent years. Everyone seems to be agreeing that the church is in a difficult position, if not in crisis at this point in history. As a church, we need to gather information to enable us to make informed decisions about the best way to proceed in the difficult years ahead.

After a summary of the events that have brought us, as a church to this point, I will explain my research methods and questions. Having collated and analysed the results of the individual interviews, in a way that flags up any particular trends, I will then suggest ways forward. For I believe the church needs to adapt its strategies in nine specific ways, which I will illustrate using bibliographical research and reference to trends within the interviews themselves.

The Story So Far - Why the Church Needs to Adapt.

There was once a time when the church was regarded as being an important influence on British society. We were a “Christian” country, represented by an established Church of England, whose values permeated society at every level, from the lowest to the highest. Throughout the 20th century, however, things have been changing. Tremendous advances in the world of medicine and science have enabled this time and age where humans are living longer than ever before. Somehow the ultimate questions of life, death and eternity seem to be less urgent than in previous years.

Culturally, society has also been changing at a rate of knots. In previous centuries culture

changed much more slowly, due to problems with transport and communication. Now, however, thanks to the advent of radio, television and the internet, cultural ideas can be communicated at the speed of light itself. The church has found it hard to keep up with these cultural trends. For a while it managed to continue its old mission strategies, born in the logic of the enlightenment, with some success. From time to time churches hosted “missions”, inviting visiting speakers, who outlined the logic of the gospel and appealed to the reason of their hearers in order to invite their conversion to Christ. Other churches focused on social action as a mission strategy, running soup kitchens, and community groups as a way of reaching into the lives of people in the local area offering the gospel on a gentle one-to-one basis as they served others. Yet the numbers of people coming forward at church missions has decreased in recent years. From 1990 onwards Christians I know were starting to feel that these were no longer the best mission techniques. Questions have also been asked of the community-service model as the best way of bringing people into the church itself. For sometimes, those serving others did not actually do so in a way that embodied the gospel. “One cannot find in the new testament the blueprint for any socio-economic program...We must be reminded that it is dangerous to preach the gospel as part of any system. The gospel is lost through any such identification”. (Donovan 1982 p164) Ann Morisy (May 2005) warns us against buying into secular practice “Or they will end up saying ‘isn’t the council doing a good job’ about you.”

The worship services of churches have also changed throughout the 20th century, sometimes almost beyond recognition. The second Vatican council changed the face of Roman Catholic worship throughout the world, bringing more informality and participation to the liturgy which was translated from Latin into modern English. The Church of England also updated its liturgy, working together with representatives of other denominations on new translations of texts. By the 1970s churches were beginning to update their music too. Folk songs, and later soft-rock style choruses, strung into a “worship-time” reminiscent of a “set” played by a local pub band were beginning to replace “hymn sandwiches” (of hymns interspersed with prayers and a sermon) or the formal choral evensong in many churches.

Yet even these new moves did not change the fact that the rates of church attendance were gradually falling throughout the country. In fact some traditionalists have blamed the decline on these new moves. “Having had little contact with the older liturgy, or good liturgy of any type, young Catholics are rootless, lacking historical anchors for critically evaluating their present liturgical experience. They are hungry and thirsty for what they do

not know and cannot name: the transcendent in liturgical form.” (Parrella 2006: par 9) This statistical fall in attendance has continued throughout the last 20 years of the 20th century, and the church is not alone in this struggle. There has also been a fall in the membership of many other voluntary organisations too. “Membership of trade unions, political parties and other organisations is in decline.” (Moynagh 2001: p71) The church is now no longer a central part of British Society. It also faces much stiffer competition than ever before. The advent of Sunday trading has given the average family a much wider choice of things to do on a Sunday morning, and the church does not even have the spiritual monopoly that it once had.

The increasing multiculturalism of society and ease of availability of travel has also given the “spiritually-minded” a huge choice of options to pursue. Paganism is now the fastest growing religion in the UK. According to Yvonne Richmond there are now more members of the pagan federation than the Baptist church (Richmond: Nov 2005) and practices previously regarded as exotic or unheard of have become increasingly common in society. For example Feng Shui, tarot reading, meditation and alternative healing therapies.

However, not all the news is bad news for the church. Recent surveys such as the faith survey commissioned by the BBC in November 2005 show that 67% of society still regard themselves as being a Christian of some sort. This is an extremely high figure. Often these statistics do not translate themselves into church attendance statistics though. Although this particular survey puts the number of people regularly attending church to be unusually high, at 14%, often the statistics of church attendance are more likely to be much lower, at less than 7.9 % according to Lancaster University (2002 : par 5) The demographics of church attendance is also changing. Congregations are becoming older year by year. Younger people also have less background knowledge of “folk-Christianity”, that is the information they learned at school, in church, or from their parents when they were children. In some cases, they have a complete ignorance of the bible altogether. It is significant noticing some of the most basic mistakes that some younger contestants on TV quiz shows are making these days, when faced with some very basic biblical questions about characters such as Moses, Noah and Jonah. Churches have, in the past, relied upon this “folk-Christianity” dormant in society, in order to be the springboard for their mission-strategies. Now this is becoming less and less possible to do. New approaches will need to be pioneered instead.

The picture is not as grim as it may appear at first sight. Ann Morisy reminds us that we

should not be too defeatist and pessimistic. “We are coming from a miserable seventy last years, but there are far more pubs closing than churches.” (Morisy May 2005) Although the numbers of people happy to use the term “religion” has dropped according to Richmond, the numbers of people willing to talk about “spirituality” has risen. According to recent research more people are having spiritual experiences than ever before. “Surveys in 1987 and 2000 showed that the percentage of people reporting some kind of spiritual experience had increased universally in that period.” (Spencer 2005:p12). In 1987 48% of people were aware of having a religious/ spiritual experience . In 2000 this had risen to 76% (ibid.) People also seem more willing to talk about these experiences than has been the case in the past. “There is total tolerance, and all positions are respected, providing that they aren’t exclusive” (Richmond: Nov 2005). This, I believe is reflected in the fact that the Da Vinci code is one of the best-selling books recently. “The theological thriller by New Hampshire's Dan Brown is still selling an astonishing 80,000 to 90,000 hardcover copies per week.” (Mehigan 2004: par 1) The leading character in the book’s quest for truth and the holy grail seems to mirror society’s own search for the “Holy Grail” of religious experience. Yet Dan Brown’s book also voices society’s mistrust of church leaders, authority structures and fundamentalist religious sects. These, particularly post 9/11 are feared by many. Terry Pratchett, in a recent novel , makes the point in a nutshell when he says “The presence of those seeking the truth is infinitely to be preferred to those who think they’ve found it.”(p195 Pratchett 2003) I have tried to remember this and to take this on board throughout my research.

“We live in a period of transition, on the borderline between a paradigm that no longer satisfies and one that is, to a large extent, still amorphous and opaque. A time of paradigm change is, by nature, a time of crisis - and crisis, we remind ourselves, is the point where danger and opportunity meet” (Bosch 91p 366). We have to grasp these opportunities, and in order to grasp them we need to glean more of an understanding of the nature of the spiritual experiences of the people around us. This is why I believe it to be important to look at the spiritual journeys of some of the residents of central York. Because they do have spiritual journeys, with or without the accompaniment of church members. For it would be profoundly arrogant of us to assume that only Christian churchgoers can have valid spiritual journeys.

Jon Drane (2000) and Mike Riddell (1998) both remind us, in their own ways, of this important fact. God is actively at work in the world outside the church “ God is not a God who likes to be constrained, and has a habit of bursting boxes with delight” (Riddell 1998

p27) Mike Riddell's book contains an inspiring commentary on Chapter 10 of the book of Acts and uses it to challenge us to begin moving in new directions. The Mission Theological Action Group, more subtly, says "Spiritual experience is common to all human beings, whether they acknowledge it as such or not" (MTAG 1996 p101). Just by keeping our eyes open to the behaviour of those around us, it is becoming increasingly obvious that more and more people are beginning to acknowledge and celebrate their spiritual sides. They just aren't coming to the church to do it. John Drane (2000 p 141) seems to give some clues to our future strategies "If God is truly at work in our world, then the most effective evangelism will take place when we recognise what God is already doing, and place ourselves alongside that, rather than imagining that God can only work in ways that we might either orchestrate or approve of." In order to recognise what God is doing we need to ask people about their spiritual journeys. To give them a chance to voice the way that God has spoken to them on their life-journey.

If we accept the premise that God speaks to everyone, whether they are inside the church or not, then we end up having to accept the profound influence that our culture has on us. For God is able to speak to us through our culture, our music, our arts, our films, our books and our relationships. As Marshall McLuhan (1964) famously said, "The medium is the message." Is it so much of a leap to expect the Eternal Word, the *Logos*, to speak through the medium of our cultural expressions? Personally I believe that our cultural and our spiritual journeys are inextricably linked. We cannot divorce our spiritual lives from our daily cultural journey, any more than we can divorce ourselves from the environment we live in. Society is constantly bombarding us with messages, from the advertising hoardings, the music being played as we shop, the films and the trailers for films we encounter along the way, the internet, newspapers, and even the books that we read as we relax on the beach and "try to get away from it all".

Yet truly "getting away from it all" is never really an option. Instead we need to begin tuning in to the voice of God speaking within it all and to ask those around us how they are hearing that voice. Only then can we begin to look at future strategies. Are the traditionalists right? Should the church be back-peddalling, and regaining a sense of mystery and unchangeability which stands out from the shifting sands of our culture, or should we be pressing onward into uncharted territory, allowing the cultural and spiritual journeys of those around us to shape our worship events and mission strategies. The only way to truly make some decisions on how the church should be responding to people's journeys is to look closer at those journeys themselves.

Research Methods and Questions.

I decided that the most effective way forward in this task would be by scheduling a small series of in-depth interviews, rather than by utilising a form or short questionnaire. The reasoning behind this approach was twofold. Firstly, we already have a good deal of information provided by the large-scale surveys such as Savage (2006), Francis and Robbins (2005), Hay and Hunt (2000) and Heelas and Woodhead (2005). However, personalising this information and applying it to a more geographically select area, taking “snapshots” of the individual journeys of some York residents would hopefully enable us to think more carefully about appropriate mission strategies for the church in the specific town of York in the future. Secondly Jamieson (2002: p10) reminds us of the benefits of face-to-face interviews which allow “Questioning in much greater detail than is possible in a written or telephone survey.” Jamieson mentions that this method also makes it possible to pick up on underlying gestures and feelings of the interviewee.

The criteria I decided to adopt in relation to those being interviewed was that they had to live in York and not to be a regular churchgoer, although I knew that some interviewees had attended church on odd occasions. The interviewees were friends, neighbours, acquaintances, or friends of friends. I also attempted to have a good spread of ages and sexes, although it is slightly weighted at around the 40 mark, which is perhaps inevitable given that most of my contact circle is of a similar age to myself. I also decided to make the interviews anonymous, apart from giving information about sex, age group and life stage. With this in mind, in analysis I will refer to interviewees by their interview number, capitalised and in italics as if it were a proper name.

The questionnaire itself consisted of a series of 17 questions, the answers to which were recorded on a dictaphone, to enable free-expression between myself and the interviewee. At the start of the interview I told the interviewee that the questions were applicable, not only to recent events, but the whole of their life, and that they were free to pass on any question they did not wish to answer. I estimated the interview to last approximately 30 minutes, however, in actuality the length of the responses varied enormously, between 20 minutes and an hour and a half. I decided to make no attempts to cut short the conversation, simply listening and allowing the questions to prompt any in-depth revelations that the interviewee wished to disclose. This approach paid enormous dividends in some cases, such as during interview 7, when some in-depth disclosures of *Seven's* treatment at the hands of a “born again” group occurred at a later point in the

interview.

The first question, about three wishes for the world, was intended as a warm-up question, but also to highlight the interviewee's main planetary concerns. The second "What would you like your friends to say about you on your 70th birthday" was taken from Hollinghurst (2005:p104) and I picked it in order to home in on some of the interviewee's goals in life. The third question, on inspirational books, was designed to focus on influential literature in order to give us clues about the sort of literature the interviewees consider spiritual, in order to inform our own reading, and also open up areas of conversation about the subjects the interviewees found spiritual. The question on films was similar. I expected many people to have encountered thought-provoking films that gave much food for spiritual contemplation.

The sixth question was specifically about the subject's spiritual journey, if they felt they were on one. Question 7, regarding music, moved back onto the area of culture, and was of particular interest to me in that church public worship contains large amounts of music and it may be useful to analyse whether certain styles were more appropriate to this purpose than others for the interviewees.

Question 8 was about friendships and the most important part of this question for me was to discover what it was about the interviewees friendships that were important for them. This should enable us as a church to consider what skills we need to develop in order to become a more caring community of people. Question 9 was the reverse side of the cultural coin. I wanted to find out what the interviewees found unhelpful in order to pinpoint some of society's cultural evils, and also avoid them within the church environment. The tenth question, about art, was similar to the music question in that it was aiming to pinpoint the most inspiring forms and styles of art to use in a worship environment.

The eleventh and twelfth questions were really designed to be about reinventing church, without using the word "Church". What sort of environment, people and activities would be the most beneficial to our interviewees from the point of view of spiritual exploration and development?

The final four questions were focusing more on Christianity and previous experiences of the Church, both personally and politically. For the thirteenth question I showed Salvador

Dali's "Christ of St John of the cross", inviting opinions, before asking respondents who they thought Jesus Christ was. Again this was based on Hollinghurst (2005:p107) but I changed the present tense of "Who do you believe Jesus Christ to be" to the past tense of "Who do you think Jesus Christ was", in order to give greater allowance to the possibility that they interviewees may consider him to have died. The fifteenth question quizzed interviewees about the type of church services they may have experienced before asking the final, and rather broad question. "What do you think of the church?" which gives them the opportunity to consider their feelings about the church as an institution.

The results of the Interviews.

The results of the first question were fairly predictable in many ways, as *One*, quite-rightly commented "That's a Miss World question isn't it?" Peace was mentioned by four people, seven people mentioned poverty or hunger in some way and six people mentioned happiness in some way. However there were some more unusual responses. Free Speech was mentioned by *Two* as being important and acceptance by *Three* with this being echoed by *Eleven and Twelve's* requests for tolerance . These seem linked. *Nine* had an unusual take on things by wishing people to be fully awake and preferably Buddhist and only *Four* mentioned environmental concerns as an issue. *Six* interestingly, pinpointed selfishness as a problem. A surprising answer came from *Ten* who wished for a more rational world, but perhaps that is echoed by *Eleven's* request for more common sense.

Unfortunately, question two tended to generate a number of shallow answers, along the lines of *Four's* "He's still here" and *Five's* "Not a bad old stick", which perhaps are generated by the English reticence about talking about achievements, even in the sense of life-goals, for fear of boasting . But there were some deeper threads lurking beyond the humorous comments. Being a nice, good person was mentioned by four people, and friendship values such as loyalty or kindness were mentioned by *One, Three, Six, Eleven,* and *Twelve*. Good Health was mentioned by *Four* and *Ten*.

The question on books contained no common threads apart from Tove Jansson, but perhaps this reflects the deeply personal and individualistic nature of reading as an activity which is generally done solo. Some of the books, such as the Hugh Prather book suggested by *Seven* and the book by Jill Paton Walsh suggested by *Eight* were both the types of book that I might have expected people to find inspirational, as were biographies such as those suggested by *Eight* and *Six*. *Nine's* choice of Schumacher and *Four's* choice of Desmond

Morris were also entirely-understandable choices of thought-provoking books. There were however, some surprises. I never expected to see Enid Blyton described as life-changing, but *Five's* reasons for choosing her made sense. "The good got on in the world, and the bad got caught and punished.". This perhaps encompasses some deep seated longings for justice in a world where this rarely seems to happen in real life. I was also surprised to see the New Scientist magazine make it into *Four's* book list, and yet the magazine's capacity for constantly stretching our knowledge of the known universe could well be classed as making a difference in how we view the world, quite literally in fact. Similar qualities seemed to influence *Eleven's* choice of *The Observer's book of Manned Space Flight*. Other fictional books chosen by the interviewees, such as Aldous Huxley, *When Hitler Stole Pink Rabbit* and *V for Vendetta* all seemed to carry warnings about the power of evil, yet, conversely Tove Janisson's book, chosen by *Three* focuses on the beauty of a friendship between a grandmother and her granddaughter. *Twelve* mentioned the most books, but she confessed to being a prolific reader, and she actually kept notes of important books in her diary.

Many people seemed to find the question on films a little difficult. Some people, such as *Ten* and *Three* found it hard to give me any titles at all, which I found surprising. For my later interviews I even gave some warning that I would be asking about important books and films and music, in order to give some thinking-time, but people still found this difficult. In retrospect this particular area may have either benefited from a written, rather than a spoken question. Films that I would have expected to appear, such as *The Matrix*, *Lord of the Rings*, *Amelie*, *Brokeback Mountain* or *Narnia* were conspicuous by their absence. However, *Star Wars*, which I had expected, was mentioned by *Eleven*. *Eleven* also mentioned *Highlander* and in describing why this was important to him, he seemed to gain some insight into the films resonance with his own experience. Other films, such as *Bridget Jones* which was picked by *Five* or the Bollywood movies chosen by *Seven*, I felt were there for their entertainment rather than their spiritual value. *Twelve* picked films about people and relationships which taught her how to relate to other people better. Once again there was an immense variety of responses with no duplication of answers.

There were a number of biographical films and films about people's inner thoughts such as *Good Will Hunting*, *Gandhi*, *Cry Freedom*, *Proof* and *A Beautiful Mind*. Three people also mentioned musicals as being significant, and I do believe that the *Sound of Music* has greater significance than many care to admit, for beneath the lightheartedness and the crowds of people who like to dress up as nuns and sing along with the songs while

watching the film, there is an inspiring biographical story of a family who defied the Nazis and lived to tell the tale. The only film about Jesus was mentioned much later, by *One*, when he told me about the impact of *The Passion of the Christ* on his perceptions of Jesus and what he went through.

The answers about places were extremely interesting because they showed a high degree of correlation in that *everyone* mentioned one of the following. The countryside, churches or the sea. York Minster was particularly significant, as it was mentioned at some point by six people at different times. However, the interviewees expressed this appreciation in different ways. *Five* described how lighting candles in the Minster made her feel better. *One* mentioned the hugeness of the building, *Two* its tranquility and safety, *Three* mentioned the architecture of minsters and cathedrals as an artistic thing, which was echoed by *Four* who also mentioned the effort involved in its construction.

During the interviews, I did wonder whether there would be any factors that were specific to York itself, and York residents' appreciation of the Minster is definitely one of the things which specifically stood out as being unique to this place. The other specific item being the influence of the local Buddhist centre (which was mentioned by *Eight*, *Nine* and *Twelve*). However the Minster's positive reports do also correlate with national research where people generally speak positively of churches and cathedrals "Seeing them as spiritual, awe-inspiring, beautiful, calming, affecting buildings that could even help one's spirituality. Cathedrals were particularly praised." (Spencer 2005: p166). This is backed up by statistics too. "The national census reported that 80 per cent of Britons visit a church building at least once per year." (Savage 2006: p159). Mark Oakley describes churches as "Drop-in centres for those with a homeless, often unfocused, faith" (Brown 2005: p5). So York residents are not particularly unusual in appreciating their local cathedral.

Local churches, as sacred buildings were highly thought of by everyone apart from *Six*, *Nine* and *Eleven* who do not mention them at all, although *One* did mention that he likes the feel of them but sometimes finds them oppressive. *Twelve* appreciated the buildings so much that she would be willing to pay to preserve them, despite being Pagan herself.

The music question contained a great deal of variety and some surprises. The most surprising thing for me being the lack of special songs, considering the popularity of playing specific pop songs at funerals these days. The only person that mentioned a specific song was *Five*, although *Nine* did mention love songs in general. The popularity

of classical music was also surprising, with seven people mentioning it as being spiritual. Although I expected to encounter some references to choral music from people associating choirs with images of church, I was more surprised to see references to strident pieces such as the *Rite of Spring* mentioned by *Eight* and *Six* and *Carmina Burana* mentioned by *Four*. Black Gospel was mentioned by *One* and *Two*, with *Two* recounting her experiences of the music in church and *One* expressing his desire to see more gospel music used. Both admired the energy within Black Gospel. Interestingly, soft rock was conspicuous by its absence, considering the amount of churches that are switching to this as the main musical diet in worship. The nearest thing to this was the Van Morrison mentioned by *Six*, although at another point he mentioned that he disliked “happy clappy” worship. Drumming was mentioned by *Seven* and hinted at by *Four* in his reference to African music. The ethnic music of Ireland and the Middle East was also mentioned by *Three* which was echoed by *Twelve*’s appreciation of Celtic music.

Speaking as a musician myself I am aware that it is sometimes difficult to disentangle music from memories, as pieces of music can be special because of the memories of times and places when they were first heard. This was alluded to by *Ten* in his comment about pieces that have been important to him because he sang them at a particular time. Wordless or “Chillout” music, which would include artists such as *Brian Eno* was also referred to by *Two*, *Four* and *Eleven*. Two people, *Seven* and *Eight*, both trained musicians, had some unusual but important perspectives on spiritual music. *Seven* mentioned the fact that the harmonics of a piece can be important, the notes that you *don’t* hear. “The meditative sound you hear beyond the sound”. *Eight* also mentioned meditation in connection to music practice, which was mentioned as having meditative qualities.

The question on friendships, as might be expected, produced some highly individual answers of people that were important. *Eleven* and *Two* both mentioned their grandmothers as being deeply significant and *Twelve* mentioned her mother. Five people mentioned their partners, but I would have expected the figure to have been higher for this. Four people also mentioned friends from school.

Perhaps the more significant part of this question, is the sort of qualities that were important in defining a good friend. *Six*, *Nine* and *Eleven* mentioned being a spiritual person as being important, which was not so surprising considering the question was about friendships that have helped them on their spiritual journey. *Eight* and *Nine* mentioned kindness and *Two*, *Three* and *Seven* mentioned being there at times of need. *One*, *Two* and

Eleven mentioned the more inspirational side of friendship such as seeing the world in a new way, showing potential or simply being inspiring. *Seven* and *Five* mentioned loyalty, and being “on your side” whereas for *Twelve* the important factors were inclusivity and openness.

When it came to the question on unhelpful things there was a surprising amount of correlation, considering the popularity of the elements being criticised. Three people specifically mentioned newspapers and *Five* and *Eleven* hinted at them. *Two*, *Three* and *Twelve* mentioned the cult of celebrity as being a negative thing and *Four*, *Six*, *Eight* and *Nine* mentioned violence in some way. *Two*, *Eleven* and *Twelve* mentioned *Big Brother* as being detrimental.

The art question seemed easy for some and far more difficult for others. *Three*, *Five* *Nine* and *Ten* had difficulty answering it as they felt they didn’t know very much about art. Six people mentioned pictures or sculptures of the natural world, or the natural world itself, which echoes people’s appreciation of creation itself as sacred space. *Six* and *Seven* both appreciated Kandinsky and Bridget Riley and *Three* admired architecture as an art form. The most surreal moment, however, was when *Two* cited Salvador Dali’s *Christ of St John of the Cross* as having been extremely important to her, as, unknown to her, this was the picture used in a forthcoming question.

Seven people said that if they wanted to meet with others to explore their spiritual side, they would want to do so in small or informal groups. *Three* and *Six* both really preferred to do this sort of work alone, whereas *One*, although he appreciated informality, wanted the experience of the “wow” factor of many people gathered together. *One*, *Five* and *Two* would prefer to be with friends to explore their spiritual side, whereas, conversely *Six*, if he couldn’t do it alone, would prefer to be with people he didn’t know too well. The lack of judgement and acceptance was mentioned by *Seven*, *Twelve* and *Ten*, who was extremely wary of manipulation and evangelism. *Twelve* also mentioned that she was disgusted by evangelistic proselytisation, but not during the interview. A constant theme, throughout the interviews was that of tolerance and respect for other’s beliefs.

The Dali picture didn’t really connect with anybody on a spiritual level, apart from *Two*, who had an amazingly positive reaction to the picture, due to it being the same picture that had profoundly affected her in the past. However, this could partly be due to the way I phrased the question. Most people did talk about the artistic qualities of the picture,

although *Eleven* described its more spiritual connotations. Four people mentioned its darkness, and it was generally described in negative terms such as ‘Morbid, desperate, unpleasant and cruelty.’”

It felt like, on the whole *Four* summed up people’s responses well when he said “That picture doesn’t do a lot for me because ...It is not something that has much meaning for me,” although *Ten* was even more scathing in his criticism, saying “ Its everything I dislike about Christian mythology.” Savage (2006: p110) also mentioned a bad reaction to the picture amongst their survey’s pilot-group. However this might just be due to the particular crucifixion picture chosen. I must admit I have mixed reactions to it myself, but chose it due to the fact that Spencer (2005: p130) used it.

The question about who Jesus was produced a much more positive reaction, and no-one spoke about Jesus in negative terms, although *Five* and *Six* didn’t know the answer. *One*, *Two* and *Eleven* said that he was the Son of God, and, by that, seemed to mean that Jesus was divine, rather than “Son of God” as a formal-title. *Three* entertained the possibility that he might have been put on Earth by God. Six people felt that he was simply a very good human being and *Eight* and *Nine* felt that he was enlightened or exceptional . Only *Seven* mentioned that he might have been a prophet.

The question about church experience was one which gave much more surprising answers than I had imagined. To my knowledge none of the interviewees were regular churchgoers and most I thought had had no contact with church whatsoever. However I was aware that two people had attended church in the past and given up for some reason. Yet, in fact nearly all of them had had some sort of church contact or experience in the past. *One*, *Two*, *Three*, *Six*, *Eight*, *Ten* and *Twelve* had either attended church schools or been a regular churchgoer in childhood and *Seven* and *Eleven* had surprising and horrific tales to tell of their regular attendance at church and their subsequent treatment at the hands of churchgoers. *Twelve*’s answers also surprised me, because I knew that she was a committed Pagan and I actually expected that she would be as negative about church as Christian’s sometimes are about Pagans. However her positive description of regular church attendance and praying to her own god whilst she was there surprised me greatly. Had I realised that she was a regular churchgoer I may not have interviewed her as this did not meet my selection criteria, and yet, hearing her experiences was a valuable learning opportunity. For, as Steve Hollinghurst reminds us, “If Paganism is the fastest growing religion in Britain (having grown 100% in just 5 years) and at current trends will be the

largest religion in 25 years, we would do well to look at why.” (Croft 2005: p103) For *Twelve* the answers seemed to lie in Paganism’s non-judgemental attitude, its core rule “And harm you none. Do what you will,” and its similarity to her previous beliefs.

The final question, about people’s opinions of “the church”, came out much as I expected to, and certainly agreed with what a number of books have said about the general public’s perceptions of the church as an institution. Croft’s survey (2005: p48) is particularly damning with the church being described by interviewees as being “ Embarrassing, dull, narrow, bigoted, hypocritical, unfriendly, unreal, prescriptive, judgemental...and unable to handle doubt.”

One mentioned the church’s obsession with money, at the expense of environmental care and the resulting hypocrisy, which was echoed by *Three’s* comments about “corruption, confusion and well, male-orientated madness” . The Vatican was specifically criticised by *Seven* and *Twelve*, and church leadership in general by *Eleven*. This does not surprise me either as it conveys the impression of being the epitome of a undemocratic, hierarchical authoritarian structure. *Six* and *Nine* mentioned its struggles as an institution saying, respectively, that it is “struggling to kind of, connect” and that it seems to have “lost its focus”. *Four* commented that “the majority of people are there because they’ve been born into it” and then asked the question “wouldn’t the world be a better place if we all lived in harmony?” sadly implying that this harmony is not visible in the church.

A number of people, including *Three*, *Eight* and *Ten* made the distinction between the institution (which was bad) and the people within it, and the needs that the church is meeting which were good. As *Eight* said “There is a role for the church to play”. *Five’s* comment about the church was very personal and specific in that she hated the Sign of Peace. There was no mention of the structure or institution itself. *Two* and *Ten* were probably the most positive about the church. *Two* called it “A spiritual place” where she didn’t feel judged whereas *Ten* acknowledged its useful moral contributions and the work of vicars. However, in order to improve the work of the church, he seemed to want to remove the very thing that gives it life, its relationship with God.

I have left the analysis of question *Six* until last, due to its highly individualistic nature. *One*, *Two*, *Three*, *Eight*, *Nine* and *Twelve* thought that they were on a spiritual journey. In fact *Eight* *Nine* and *Twelve* went further than that and said that *everyone* was *Four*, *Five* and *Ten* said a very-definite no to this question, whereas there were more tentative answers

from *Six*, *Seven* and *Eleven*. *Six* simply didn't know the answer. *Seven* seemed to imply that her journey had been in the past, and *Eleven* described himself as being "In a spiritual siding".

One described a journey that began in questioning, and mostly described the emotions associated with the journey, such as pain, joy, releasing and letting-go, rather than specific events. Although he did give some historical background. He was brought up in a non-churchgoing environment, although he sometimes attended church at school. He was led through the New Age movement and then later came to a sense that "Some things felt wrong, and some things felt right." He did also mention that it was incredibly personal and I expect that is why he doesn't flesh out many details, although later on he does mention the impact of Mel Gibson's *Passion* on his life, the previous year. He basically seems to hint, rather than say specifically, that at that point he became a Christian believer.

Two described her journey as being a bit of a roller coaster and that she felt she was quite steady at the moment. She describes the church as having been a bit part of her life until she was 24. She says that she wasn't particularly religious, but valued the advice and friendship of others on her journey. She feels in a good place at the moment, and because of this doesn't feel the need to visit the Minster to pray as much anymore. *Two* seems to be a Christian believer, judging by her very powerful reaction to the Dali picture and her belief that Jesus was the Son of God. Also, in her answer to question 14 she tells how her Catholic upbringing made her feel like she didn't fit into the church's rigidly defined box, and it was only later that she could pick and choose which parts of this faith she related to. She is still very positive about church, but doesn't feel the need to attend regularly. She seems to feel that ultimately, her journey is a personal one "I've always felt that I think there was only me can do anything about it".

Three also came from a Catholic background, and has some sense of the presence of God. "I still feel that there is something there. Some point to us being there." Yet she describes her spirituality in very earthy terms. "It would probably be a spiritual journey in a very simple sense where you just have to do your best, to, you know, be nice to people and try and make other people lives nice." I felt that she was actually not very willing to engage with God or the bigger questions, and that was mirrored in her body language, which seemed to convey discomfort when talking about more spiritual matters and in the fact that her answer to this question was quite short.

Conversely, *Four*, answered in great detail, but described his journey as being a human journey, rather than a spiritual one. He was extremely open about his experiences with magic mushrooms as a student and described an incredibly powerful experience of being at one with the planet, and yet important as an individual. “I spent several hours just being,...in this state of wonderment.”. He compares this experience as being similar to other people’s experiences of God “Because I got this feeling of love, this feeling of peace, and this feeling of being at one.” However, he analyses his experience in scientific terms, considering that he may have had his “God-spot” massaged by these drugs.

Four also has a very strong and highly-developed sense of ethics, particularly in relation to sustainable development, where he has managed to create a better environment for many people in York, both through seminars on composting and recycling, and being a founder-member of the York Credit Union. In fact his ethical lifestyle would put most Christians to shame. *Four* was also very open about his struggles with ADHD and using cannabis as self-medication to help this condition. However the saddest part of *Four*’s journey for me, came in reply to question 16. “I’m not afraid of God reaching out and touching me. That’s why I’ve tried praying. But I have got no answer.” The other sad aspect of his journey was his father’s experiences at the hands of the Plymouth Brethren. It was particularly shocking to hear about how his father was thrown out by his own family for not believing in a literal six-day-creation, and yet I was pleased to hear that through “Jenny” he was able to experience a born-again Christian whose faith was vibrant, true and which sustained her through some terrible experiences.

Five said that she wasn’t on a spiritual journey, and didn’t elaborate further. I felt that, like *Three* she was a little uncomfortable talking about spiritual things, and yet her positive encounter of prayer in the Minster speaks of some sort of experience with God, but perhaps she doesn’t feel she has the spiritual vocabulary to articulate it.

Six was brought up in a churchgoing family, but didn’t really enjoy it as a child, describing himself as a “Clock-watching Christian”. He then skips forward to the present-day, in describing his journey. He specifically mentions the impact of two people in his life, his wife and an elderly Quaker friend, positive experiences of occasional visits to our own church, Visions, and negative experiences of the “happy clappy” . Yet he laments life’s busyness and the fact that if we followed what was actually taught in the bible the world would be a better place.

Seven also gave a lengthy description of her spiritual journey, and yet it was only later, in reply to question 11, that she finally divulged the terrible story of her experience of Christianity. In reply to question 6 though, she described her experiences of meditation as a spiritual practice. She described her frustrations of trying to get into meditation whilst at college, and her difficulties at blanking her mind. *Seven* has had an extremely rich life, and that richness of experience comes out in her description of her journey and her visits to places in Australia. She also describes the fact that sometimes she knows what's wrong with people when she lays hands on them, but doesn't know if that is a spiritual thing. Now she says that she has learnt to meditate by not blanking her mind, but by accepting what is going on around her. In contrast, her experiences of a Born-Again Christian group were horrendous. She was originally invited to this group by a neighbour, but then they started asking her to give up more and more things. She found that her personal concerns which she discussed privately with her pastor, were being preached about publicly on a Sunday. Eventually this group made her choose between God and university. Finally, in a story that echoes the experiences of *Four's* father and *Eleven* she was ostracised by them.

Eight's story was interesting because it gives a face to some church dropout statistics, and there seem to be a number of elements to this journey. She was brought up within the Church of England, and attended church regularly until she was in her late teens. She describes her brothers leaving church, and her own involvement, helping in the Sunday school. She also describes the positive experiences of her time in her school CU and the Methodist church. Yet it is sad that she was not allowed to continue attending the Methodist church if that was where she felt at home, with friends her own age. It is interesting that her journey away from Christianity towards Buddhism seems not, initially, to have been as a result of negative experiences of church, (although she does mention some bickering) Yet the main catalyst seems to have been the pain of her cousin's death and her own struggles with depression. Thankfully, her vicar sounded extremely supportive during this period. However it is sad, that at a later point when she was at university, that her Christian friend wasn't more supportive of her journey, rather than trying to get her to sign up at the church of her friend's choice. It is also sad, that an unfriendly welcome during a church visit could contribute to her wanting to leave Christianity. Yet many things can also be learned from *Eight's* positive experiences of meditation, which also exists in Christianity, especially in the Catholic and Orthodox traditions. Another way in which we can learn from her positive experiences of Buddhism is from their offer of teaching about practical ways to tackle issues such as dealing with death, practising loving-kindness and helping other people.

Nine's journey is also a journey towards Buddhism, but unlike *Eight* he is coming from an atheist background. In his case his journey started with an interest in Ecology (which *One*, *Two*, *Four*, *Six*, and *Twelve* also mentioned). A medical scare led to him considering the big questions in life, and one of his friends suggested trying the meditation classes at the university. He responded positively to this suggestion due to feeling quite stressed in his life. He mentions, that, as an introvert, thoughts, feelings and philosophical questions interested him. Now he has moved to meditating regularly and practising a Buddhist lifestyle that seems to be remarkably holistic; far more holistic than most Christians I know, in that his faith even impacts the way he reacts to such things as violence on television.

Ten did not feel that he was on a spiritual journey. In fact, in his general religious attitudes he seemed to mirror very closely the results of Savage's survey (2006: p38) "The world view of our young people operates on a more modest scale of the here and now, rather than something beyond." One of the most interesting thing about his answer though, is that he actually seems to have pondered this subject quite deeply, and *still* decided that he is honestly not spiritual.

Eleven's story was very moving and traumatic. He describes himself as being in a spiritual siding, and yet actually seems to have a very healthy relationship with God, having seemingly reconciled himself to tremendously painful events, such as his wife's miscarriage and her inability to have more children. There were tears in his eyes as he described this, and yet a sense of peace in his speech and his body language with no current sense of anger at God. In fact he was the only person who prayed briefly during the interview, when he looked up and said "I'm sorry". His description of being ostracised by his church and forced to resign from the PCC for offering his girlfriend a home was quite horrific, and once again, we witness Christians turning their backs on someone as a reason for leaving the church. The other part of his story that I found quite disturbing, was the double-standards being practised by the church in question, in fully investigating his actions due to another man's complaints, without acting on any of *Eleven's* complaints, which showed a profound inconsistency. However, the truly hopeful thing about *Eleven's* journey is that, unlike *Seven's* similar story, his terrible experiences at church have not spoiled his relationship with God. I sensed that, at some point in the future, he may return to a more healthy Christian community, and find others he trusts to meet and pray with.

Twelve, like *Two* and *Three*, was raised as a Roman Catholic, and that experience seems to

have been a good one for her. Her mother also seems to have had a great influence on her, especially in giving her a positive view of Jesus. *Twelve* also believes that there are common elements in all the world religions, as do *Seven* and *Eight*, who both said “Ultimately its the same” when describing them. *Twelve* described it this way. “Each culture’s got recurring themes and it just gets embroidered a different way in each culture , and I think its the same in religion as well.” This echoes what Graham Cray says in *Savage* (2006: p146) “To many people today, all truths are relative except the truth that all truths are relative!”

Twelve was quite astute in her observations of the cultural changes that have happened historically with respect to Christianity, and compared this to the way that languages develop. She mentioned that, although she is a Pagan, she has gained a lot from Buddhist teachings and practices, in that they show her how to become a better person, whereas Paganism is so tolerant that nothing ever *needs* to change, so on her journey she is trying to practice becoming less angry and more friendly. She also described other parts of her journey in questions 8 and 11. She joined a Pagan coven when she was at the university in Toronto, and recognised beliefs in herself that she hadn’t, up until then, articulated. The other thing she mentioned was the goddess group that she is considering joining because currently she is not a member of any coven.

Implications and Recommendations for the Church.

As a result of my analysis of the literature and the interviews, nine specific recommendations stood out as being important to pursue in the church of the future.

1 - Valuing Meditation

One of the things that came out of the research was the value of meditation as a practice, which was appreciated by a third of the interviewees. This agrees with what a number of researchers have been suggesting. Hollinghurst (2005: p57) predicts that “Ignatian meditation is also likely to become an increasingly welcome means of healing.” and cites the example of Liz Babbs who suffered from ME. “She tried many cures and treatments but one day discovered the restorative power and healing ministry of Christian meditation.” (ibid.)

Clifford (2001: p173) agrees with this, and mentions the value of meditating on the bible

as a means of encountering God “We affirm that the discipline of reflecting on the sacred writings is very worthwhile...we have discovered that this cloud of unknowing is pierced by spending time in contemplation of the scriptures.” He also gives some practical suggestions of ways to pursue scripture meditation.

Therefore the first practical change we can make as a church is rediscover the practice of Christian meditation which has been buried or suppressed in some church traditions and use it as a tool to enhance the spirituality of both Christians and spiritual searchers. Friends of mine who have offered courses in Christian meditation to non-believers have also found that this has elicited an extremely positive response, both before and after the event.

2 - Supporting Church-Leavers

We also need to consider is the amount of people interviewed who have had previous contacts with Christianity. Perhaps this was a statistical anomaly, due to the small size of the sample. However it still speaks of the experience of those who were previously churchgoers and now are churchgoers no longer. So our second task is to learn strategies to help and support those who formerly professed a Christian faith. We also need to feel that we can be a help and a resource to those who are still pursuing their Christian faith, but outside the church community. Richter (1998: p147) has some useful ideas for this, suggesting that at times of crisis or family pressure “The church that stands alongside people and supports them at times of need is most likely to help people maintain, or retrieve, their faith in the goodness of God.”

Jamieson (2002: p129) reassures us that dropping out of churchgoing for a time is perfectly normal. And that we should learn to work with people at the pilgrimage stage, and most certainly not ostracise them! “What the leaver needs now is time, space, resources, understanding, validation and support for their own inner journey. The most helpful thing anyone can give a person experiencing this phase of the Christian journey is to tell them that it is normal.”

Grace Davie (1994: p194) points out that we need to face reality in that we have a fair amount of competition. Church is no longer a duty but a recreational occupation which competes with other leisure activities.

3 - Developing Dialogue.

Another thing we need to address is the discomfort, for many, of hierarchical church structures and their disgust of confrontational and manipulative evangelistic techniques, which are often linked. It is so easy in the light of this, to give up on mission. Yet Donovan reminds us that this is really not an option. “Mission is the meaning of the church. The church can only exist insofar as it is in mission, insofar as it participates in the act of Christ, which is mission. The church becomes the mission, the living outreach of God to the world..... The idea of church without mission is an absurdity.” (Donovan 1982 p102)

We therefore need to develop new strategies and leadership models. Moynagh (2004: p66) proposes working alongside, not against, people to help them explore their beliefs. “The church won’t get away with being dogmatic and hierarchical: it needs to be more like a partner, working with individuals as they explore belief for themselves - ‘this is how the passage has often been understood, but how do you read it?’” We need to be welcoming and open, as comparing the different reactions to *Eight* and *Twelve*’s visits to a new worshipping-group show.

However in the light of what Grace Davie says about the rise of conservatism in religious belief around the globe, this may be a hard task to undertake. (1994: p55) Yet it is an extremely important one, because those who have had bad experiences of church do not remain neutral, They become de-vangelists. “Inevitably leavers tell their stories and experiences to their friends...workmates and family members. The stories I have heard...would surely act as powerful disincentives to Christian faith.” (Jamieson 2002: p144). Jamieson also points out (ibid.) that those who have had bad experiences also turn their children against Christianity, as we witnessed in *Four*’s story.

It is also unfortunate, as Ann Morisy points out, that those who are the most enthusiastic and willing to share the gospel, put people off because there is no sense of journey, just dogmatic statements. “It is ironic therefore that those Christians who are often most keen to share their beliefs ...may well prompt the alienation of so many who might otherwise be willing to explore faith but find assertions about the truth about God an insurmountable hurdle.” (Morisy 2004: p118)

Many people seem to feel that Christians are profoundly arrogant in their treatment of the beliefs of others. “We need to stop assuming that those who don’t go to church have no

faith. Instead of confronting them with a challenge to believe, perhaps we need to move towards an expectation that something is already going on spiritually in people's lives and seek to nurture and encourage them in their faith journey." (Croft 2005: p77) This can be done through dialogue, hospitality, and shared events. Whatever we do we need to avoid the old-fashioned "turn or burn" hard sell . "Agnostics have a deep suspicion about any attempt by Christians to 'proselytise'" (Croft 2005: p98)

We need to rediscover the importance of *listening*, as *Five* quite rightly pointed out, when describing the qualities of a friend. We need to learn to listen, both to leavers, and to those just beginning the Christian journey. "Someone involved in the business environment made the comment that they couldn't understand why churches would simply let people leave without finding out why they became dissatisfied and then doing something about it." (Jamieson 2002: p142)

Yet if we are willing to accept that we can no longer assert our exclusiveness in a way that steamrollers other's beliefs, dialogue should be easier. Although I believe Moynagh 2001 is wrong in that people are willing to attack the church *as an institution*, he does make a good point on the local level "In a climate which values tolerance, attacking the Church feels unnecessary. This should make dialogue between Christians and non-believers easier." (Moynagh 2001: p84). This is helped by the fact that "Even those who are openly hostile to the church and 'Christians' in the abstract, have a high opinion of Jesus and commonly speak positively of real Christians, whom they actually know." (Croft 2005: p10)

However, in order to dialogue effectively, we must be available to be found, as Avis points out. "'Findability' is a passive term...it needs therefore to be complemented by a proactive strategy for placing the church's representatives where they cannot help being encountered. ..The current tendency for clergy to creep about incognito...militates against the findability of the church." (Avis 2003: p191) Working together on social, justice and entertainment events can also make us more visible and promote dialogue.

Steve Hollinghurst (2005:p17) also points out the value of surveys themselves. "The respondents often expressed their pleasure at being given the opportunity to talk about things they had seldom thought about, and appreciated the church treating them with respect and wanting to know their views." . I too found that this was true with the people I interviewed, but I would add the proviso that I believe that interviews should go towards

genuine research rather than as an introduction to proselytisation, which would be manipulative, wrong and damaging.

We have to be careful, however in our dialogue, not to take things too far. Basing a strategy, for example, on *Ten's* suggestion of making the church a purely secular institution would be death to us. Similarly Spencer 2005 pointed out that in one survey someone wanted to remove the cross from Christianity. "People's opinions should be used to shape not the Christian message itself but the way in which it is embodied in and communicated to an unfamiliar culture." (Spencer 2005: p177)

Thompson (2004) also warns us against secularising the church, which echoes Ann Morisy's earlier comments about secularising church social action. "The pluralist character of our society offers us, once again, the space to embody and articulate distinctive Christian discourse without feeling the necessity to reduce this to a more limited secular speak." (Thompson 2004: p23).

Part of our new strategies need to address the problems of an overly hierarchical leadership structure. Brewin (2004: p125) describes the sadness of seeing a church of 600 "Actors, writers, directors, producers, graphic artists and musicians," whose talents were mainly not being used. "It seemed extraordinary that unless they were able to preach or play the guitar their gifts were not welcome.....there was actually no room in the highly structured, highly dictatorial services for their gifts to be given." Brewin (ibid.) points out that this was encouraging a habit of coming to church to "get" rather than give, or share with others.

Brewin goes on to suggest, building on the cynical attitude of authors such as Philip Pullman about the church that perhaps we do need to build the republic of Heaven in our human relations "Because it is only in such a republic that we can hope to avoid the power abuses and dictatorships of the puppet-kings that we inevitably install in God's place." (Brewin 2004 p165)

4 - Learning Storytelling

We definitely need to learn how to share our stories. For the same people who hate confrontational evangelism, seem to really appreciate sharing and swapping stories. However, this is not as easy as it appears at first. "The one thing that strikes me over and over again is the extent to which Christians seem to lack any confidence in speaking about

their own spiritual journey...even with others in their own congregations.” (Drane 2005: p121) This is a terrible indictment of our own appreciation of the work of God in our lives. I do wonder, however if part of the problem is due to the cult of celebrity at work in the church.

Thompson (2004: p2/3) cites the tales of teenagers who were put off by a Christian’s dramatic conversation story, because their own lives were far less dramatic. “Recent Evangelicalism has inclined towards an uncritical colonisation by celebrity culture in a way analogous to its earlier uncritical espousal of much of the legacy of Enlightenment rationalism.” (Thompson 2004: p3) A number of interviewees pointed celebrity culture out as being a very negative thing, and yet it has insidiously spread into church culture too, where super-evangelists, or super-worship-leaders or super-conversion-stories, supersede the stories and talents of everyone else.

Ann Morisy gives us much hope and inspiration about appreciating the value of our ordinary life-stories. Stories are powerful and “By enabling people to develop story-rich life, ie: a life characterised by positive, generative stories, then we equip them to understand the gospel more fully.” (Morisy 2004: p 74)

Billings 2004, however points out that the Christian stories are being lost and that we need to make Christian ones better known. He raises “The question of how people are inducted into the story in a time of no religion...how do we continue to make known and understood the symbols and stories of Christianity among the less churchgoing population?” (Billings 2004: p34) He then suggests ways that this might be done by using the arts to propagate the Christmas and Easter stories, by having exhibitions on the Christmas story or the Stations of the Cross. This echoes with reports friends of mine have given about the success of a similar strategy in Cityside Baptist Church in New Zealand, where a regular Stations of the Cross exhibition by local artists became so successful that it was reported on the national evening news.

5 - Relevant Rituals

The fifth thing that the church would benefit from doing, is exploring the power of appropriate ritual and liturgy, which is another way of conveying the gospel story in a non-threatening and multi-sensory manner. Billings (2004: p35) reminds us that “First of all, ritual is a way of managing feeling and emotion. Rituals enable us to express or release

or focus feelings...ritual often succeeds where words alone would be considered inadequate or even impossible.” Rituals are also profoundly experiential. And Steve Croft reminds us that “Whilst many spiritual seekers shun any invitation to explore biblical ‘truth’, they are often wide open to explore the Christian ‘experience’” (Croft 2005: p 99)

Rituals are also understood by people on a profoundly instinctive and emotional level. John Drane reminds us that when Princess Diana died, “Shrines were constructed in public spaces as well as in homes.... but apparently without any underlying belief system apart from a generally expressed need to connect with other people, an a hope that such rituals might somehow transcend the sadness by relating to a larger reality.” (Drane 2005: p61)

I also know, from my own experience, that rituals work. Emotionally bruised people can find healing and peace through them, and those searching for truth can have a profound encounter with God through them. Perhaps this is one reason why people turn to the church’s established rituals at momentous life events. They also seem to work at many levels and perhaps this explains why “Today’s teenagers, particularly those who are unaware of church worship, are being attracted to the otherness, mystery and physical symbolism, candles, incense, water and oil, of Catholic worship.” (Croft 2005: p10)

Heelas and Woodhead, in their research in the town of Kendal, remind us that those congregations that have strong ritual and liturgy can have potential “which can be compatible with subjective-life spirituality insofar as ritual and symbol are open-textured and non-dogmatic enough to provide a point of focus for individual meditation and spiritual growth.” (Heelas 2005: p144)

Linked to the usefulness of appropriate ritual is the use of appropriate liturgy. “Apt liturgy is a very valuable resource in relation to the foundational domain because it is short and simple, and often can take place in mundane environments.” (Morisy 2004: p156) We need to nurture our vocabulary of liturgy and ritual, which we should have at our disposal to suit every occasion we can imagine. At times, when trust is built up, we might well be asked to provide something appropriate at short notice for an important moment in someone else’s journey.

6 - Responding to Requests

This brings me to my sixth recommendation . That we take the occasional offices seriously as touching points between people and God. “The church must take seriously those

occasions when people do come to church. The hastily written funeral or wedding address or the poorly performed baptism are missed opportunities with serious consequences.” (Billings 2004: p112) . One of the most hopeful elements of Savage 2006’s research was that when young people were asked about rites of passage. “Seventy-three per cent said they would want to get married in church...fifty four percent of young people wanting their children to be baptised or Christened.” (Savage 2006: p15) This is a small beacon of hope among the more miserable church statistics. Paul Avis also reminds us that “Common religion lacks that difficult, sophisticated understanding of tragedy....Common religion does not have a suffering God. A crucifix is not at the centre of its faith.” (Avis 2003: p120) This was also visible in my interviewees responses to the Salvador Dali painting. Because of this lack of understanding about the suffering Christ we may be especially helpful at times of pain and suffering as people try to come to terms with tragedy.

7 - Opening Churches

My seventh suggestion is linked to the power of ritual. We need to make sure that our churches are open as much as possible and that people can experience God in them. “Sacred space, like sacred time, is therapeutic. It is a set-apart, bounded space where no harm can come. There it is safe to take the risk of allowing oneself to be touched by a power that can make one whole.” (Avis 2003: p163) Many people in my interviews appreciated the church buildings, and perhaps we can allow the buildings themselves to speak of God by the way that we use them. Music, images, candles, stories and prayer rituals can be provided to enhance the worship experience of the casual visitor, and perhaps those people that prefer to make their pilgrimages with God solo will be inspired and enthused by their encounter with the Christian story. This may also be a good method of trialling some of the musical styles suggested by interviewees. Appropriate liturgy and experiential worship can also be provided in the form of prayers on cards or meditations on CD. The other positive benefit, as I learned from a recent talk on church security, is that break-in’s actually go down when the church is open for prayer regularly.

8 - Valuing Nature

The eighth thing that we need to concentrate on is the potential of the natural world and open spaces. Perhaps, as well as using our buildings more, we should go outside into the natural world to worship too. Yet, alongside that, we have to include the natural world, images of its beauty, and its potential for redemption into our theology and worship, as

new Celtic Christian communities such as the Iona community in Scotland have done. “In Europe...there is a fast-growing concern for rediscovering a long-lost heritage of nature-focused spirituality.” (Drane 2005: p68)

9 - Avoiding Selfishness

Finally, we need to be careful of becoming selfish. One of the most disturbing aspects of the research by Heelas and Woodhead in the town of Kendal was that the congregations of humanity (those congregations that focused more on the common good) were the ones with the worst long-term prognosis. “The subjectivization thesis would predict that congregations of humanity will be faring worst, since they offer least by way of subjective well-being.” (Heelas 2005: p125) We may also be breeding a selfish generation according to Francis’s research. “Over a third of the young people are not really concerned about environmental pollution (36%) or about the poverty of the developing nations (41%).” (Francis 2005: p48) So while we are dialoguing with others and allowing God to be experienced, we must also allow ideas of justice and care for each other and God’s creation to be birthed in spiritual seekers. However, if my interviews are typical we may have nothing to worry about, for in most of my interviewees, these ideas were more highly developed than in the lives of a lot of Christians I know. Perhaps in our dialogue, part of their mission to us may be to convert us into more caring and less selfish human beings.

Conclusions

We are living in a strange, exciting time of transition, when the rules are being rewritten, yet there is a tremendous amount of hope in the results of this research, for the church still has an important role to play, sharing in life-changing events, and being a provider of accessible “sacred space”. For, if we can take on board these nine key ideas, instead of being nostalgic and negative, we can fulfil our true potential.

Perhaps the most important thing I have gained personally from this research is that I can learn a huge amount from my neighbours if I simply ask them some open questions and give them the time to tell me their stories. One of the most inspiring thoughts on the way ahead for me comes from Vincent Donovan. He quotes a young American saying:

In working with young people in America, do not try to call them back to where they were, and do not try to call them to where you are, as beautiful as

that place might seem to you. You must have the courage to go with them to a place that neither you nor they have ever been before (Donovan 1982 pvii)

And we are not going on this journey alone. We are travelling with Christ, but more than that, Christ has already gone before us. For, since Christ's death, resurrection and ascension he is everywhere. "No power on Earth was ever going to fix Christ in one place anymore...The curtain is ripped. God has exploded. The phial has smashed and the virus has escaped." (Brewin 2004: p162) All we have to do ultimately, is listen to the story that Christ is writing in other people's lives, and join in the conversation.

word count = 11,996