

A CHURCH WITHOUT WALLS



Come with me on a visit to a parish in a city centre in Scotland. In recent years it has undergone depopulation and redevelopment, so it now has a “2-10-20 profile”: 2000 people live in it, 10,000 people work in it, and 20,000 people come in at the weekend for entertainment.

Then there are the men and women who are homeless, largely because of the collapse of family and community life. We stop to ask one homeless man, “What would you like the church to do for you?” His answer is simple: “Let me sleep inside instead of outside.” A group of churches work together to offer basic shelter over the winter. He can now eat and sleep inside and taste a caring community for a while.

Now visit our local nightclub. The manager speaks of the breakdown of community, but his club is a “new kind of community”. To our surprise, he says that if the church wants to be relevant it must become “part of the pattern and routine of our lives”. First attempts at a nightclub chaplaincy fail, but a small team of Christian clubbers are exploring how to plant a Christian congregation in and for the club scene.

Time to visit our local business men and women, asking, “What is your business? What are the people issues here? If you were doing my job, how would you do it?” One senior executive speaks sadly of the young people in business “who have nothing to fall back on”. “If the deal does not come through, or the promotion fails, where do they turn?” He urges us not to short-change people about God.

Meanwhile the shoppers rush to worship in the cathedrals of consumerism, shopping for clothes, identity and a spirituality of their choice. The quest takes them past the ancient churches where congregations grow older and smaller.

Someone jokes about selling our church to buy a

high street store where we could offer worship, meditation, counselling and a range of options for people on their spiritual journey. Only joking, or a prophetic word?

THE HORSEWHISPERER AND THE WAY TO EMMAUS (LUKE 24.13-35)

“The Horsewhisperer” is a novel by Nicholas Evans that tells the story of a horse severely injured in a car accident. The veterinarian cannot bring full recovery, and so the horsewhisperer is called in. Trained in the ways of the Native Americans to understand the body language of the horse, he stays close, learns its ways and wins its trust. At the right moment he helps the horse to face its greatest fears.

The horsewhisperer is one role model for evangelism in a secular society, and we learn our art from Jesus on the road to Emmaus. Jesus meets people who are struggling with loss. He walks and listens. He asks questions. He sets life in the story of the Messiah who suffers to enter his glory and so gives meaning to the complicated mystery of life. His words burn within them as authentic truth. He reveals his identity at a village supper table.

The Emmaus road offers clues on how to be the church in a secular world. Like the disciples we are so obsessed by what we *do not have* – loss of status, members and young people – that, ironically, we forget the one resource we *need*, the one who is alive and well and stands beside us.

The journey from Jerusalem to Emmaus may be seen as a journey away from the place of political power to the place of simplicity. European Christianity has had 1,700 years of alignment with power. It will find its renewal in a simplicity.

The Emmaus road is an invitation to be a simple church of “strugglers anonymous”; who drop their masks and take the way of the wounded healer. The



simple church is not afraid to speak a word from God that has first been lived out in our life together and then offered humbly to others, with an authority born out of authenticity. The simple church will be a place of hospitality where the stranger finds a home and Christ turns up by surprise.

QUESTIONS

1. WHY DO YOU THINK THAT THE TWO TRAVELLERS DID NOT RECOGNIZE JESUS (vv.13-18)? WHAT ARE THE BARRIERS TO PEOPLE IN YOUR COMMUNITY RECOGNIZING GOD AND JESUS TODAY?
2. "JESUS CAME NEAR AND WENT WITH THEM" (v.15), ASKING THEM QUESTIONS. HOW DOES CHURCH LIFE ENCOURAGE US TO BE FELLOW TRAVELLERS WITH OTHERS? WHAT QUESTIONS ARE PEOPLE ASKING? WHAT QUESTIONS MIGHT WE ASK THEM?
3. THE CONVERSATION UNPACKS KEY THEMES OF THE GOSPEL, WHICH ARE HELD IN COMMON WITHIN THE FAMILY OF THE REFORMED CHURCHES (vv.19-27). WHAT ASPECTS STAND OUT FOR YOU? HOW WOULD SECULAR PEOPLE OF OUR TIMES RESPOND TO THIS STORY?
4. LOOK AT THE SEQUENCE OF THE EVENTS AT EMMAUS (vv.28-32). WHERE DO PEOPLE FIND COMMUNITY TODAY? HOW CAN WE HELP THEM TO FIND JESUS IN THOSE PLACES RATHER THAN EXPECT THEM TO FIND HIM ONLY "IN CHURCH"?

PRAYER

Father God, circle us with your love that, secure in you, we may dare to risk.

Lord Jesus, centre us on your love that, following you, we may travel the unknown way.

Spirit of God, carry us in your love that, empowered by you, we may see lives transformed by Christ.

Father, Son and Spirit, embrace us in your love that, welcomed by you, we may point the way home for tomorrow's children. Amen.

AUTHOR

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"The storm buffeting the churches is very serious indeed... so serious that it marks the end of 'business as usual' for the churches and marks the need for us to begin again building the church from the ground up."
(Loren Mead in *Transforming Congregations for the Future*, Alban Institute, 1994.)

"The church is people with Jesus at the centre, travelling wherever Jesus takes us."
(A Church without Walls, report to the general assembly of the Church of Scotland.)

In working with young people... do not try to call them back to where they were, and do not try to call them to where you are, beautiful as that place may seem to you. You must have the courage to go with them to a place where neither you nor they have been before.

(Vincent J Donovan, *Christianity Rediscovered: An Epistle from the Masai*, SCM, 1982.)