

Christians in Practice Launch – Reflections and Ideas

**What Kinds of Community Activity do churches notice and value in their congregation doing?
What kinds go unnoticed? What might the consequences be?**

1) Particular kinds of activities get noticed more than others

- ‘Those who get noticed more are those who organise fetes and fayres’
- ‘95% of our time is out there in the world’ – how far do we notice and value that?
- ‘Anything connected to church’
- ‘Food banks, refugee support, street pastors’ (‘church has stake interest’).
- ‘Informal helping is commonly unnoticed’
- ‘neighbourliness, non-church-led activities’ [get noticed less]
- ‘Mostly we listen to those we know – diocesan or national speak not always heard’
- ‘Confidence to accept that not everything will be heard or needed’
- Get noticed: ‘children’s clubs, etc get noticed (but practical bits behind the scenes [don’t]’
- Doesn’t get noticed: ‘stuff that people do because they’re being a “good neighbour”, rather than something being badged’, ‘setting up rooms, etc. not being valued’.
- Noticed: ‘street pastors, food banks, work with elderly, those impacting people in church community – not those for the wider community, those that have a spiritual impact – sacred/secular divide. Big impact responses – to tragedy’
- ‘The stories we tell, the heroes we celebrate, show who we value’
- ‘Fundraising can be a route to raising awareness’
- ‘What gets mentioned in prayers (publicly)’
- ‘Churches need to be better at “surfacing” the invisible’
- ‘Response may go unnoticed because it involves an individual and is personal and/or not local’.
- ‘Children’s activities get more noticed. There are teams of people for this work. What you do as an individual goes unnoticed’.
- ‘We pray for returnees to school/college, teachers... lack of other work/caring go unnoticed’.
- ‘Good neighbourly activity is not usually affirmed/noticed/encouraged directly’.
- ‘Involved with WI – external organisations like this not encouraged, offsite’
- ‘Some roles overlooked – ministry is seen as worship, liturgy, preaching, etc – hierarchy. Someone in work needs their calling – no liturgy’.
- ‘Apologies – I’m not the vicar’ – ‘hierarchy of ministry’

2) Often there are artificial dividing lines created between ‘community’ and ‘church’ which do not in fact stand up

- ‘Frustrating when you hear talk of the community ‘out there’, rather than the local church being located in the community’.
- ‘Our church hall’ is a mindset – we can think of it instead as ‘the hall for the community’

- 'If it is going to work, it needs to allow others to become involved too – partnership. We can go quite a long way without involving the “professionals”'
- 'Mutuality – one can experience a level of change through being the helper, but there's another level of learning through mutuality'. 'This would be a helpful lens to analyse the data'.
- 'Not necessarily exclusively Christian – might stop people “claiming” things as Christian'.

3) Not noticing the congregation's existing community involvement is just part of a wider issue about the profile of time spent beyond church

- 'Most congregations don't appreciate the depth of how there are already engaged in their communities' – or if they do, 'that may not percolate through to the church's official narrative'
- [Consequences if we don't notice]: 'stop engaging in community and turn in on ourselves if not supported/encouraged'

4) The tone set by the leadership of the local church can be critical – but does it need to be?

- 'It can very much depend on the leadership of the church and what is valued. What would enable people just to do this stuff anyway?'
- 'Other organisations can be more proactive in approaching churches and offering to help' [speaker was thinking here of Christian charities specialising with work on behalf of different sorts of groups. Could they proactively approach churches to offer to help, rather than waiting for churches to approach them?]
- 'Who does the noticing? Informed noticing by friends, vs official recognition by leadership'
- 'Can be (fabricated) fear of unequal notice that leads to no notice'
- 'Clergy may affect what is highlighted'
- 'Leadership responsibility to allow smaller voices to be heard'

5) What can help?

- 'Churches need to be better at “surfacing” the invisible'
- 'Helping people appreciate that the little things matter and are Christlike'
- 'Noticing and affirming all the good that is going on in the Parish – blessing and affirming it, regardless of who it is done by'
- 'Liturgy – praise and lament, brokenness – in breaking bread for the community not just the gathered – a moment of equipping'
- 'Space for midweek reflection and sharing'
- 'Countering the hierarchy of care'
- 'proactively pray for these things'
- 'mention on Sunday daily community care'
- 'Getting involved – doing some of these things'
- 'This Time Tomorrow'
- 'Living the Christian life within the community. Responding to need wherever possible'
- 'Interview people about their role in work – what doing tomorrow, etc. Christian in secular world'

- 'Get to know each other better – volunteer requests from the front are not the best. Make a specific invitation to help in specific ways'.
- 'Charisms – the gifts people have – encourager, administrator, etc.'
- Fresh expressions, self-organised initiatives, e.g., in library or community centre'
- 'Citizens UK – 1:1 intentional conversations'
- 'Culture and ethos change top down and bottom up' – understanding where the momentum is at the "bottom" – what do people want to do?'

MOTIVATION – How far do we recognise the widespread desire to put faith into action and represent Christ in these activities? Do you think people in church speak about this motivation? In what way is the desire to share faith in community activity hopeful or concerning? How could churches respond?

1) Reflections on the picture presented in the findings

- ‘We’re not entirely sure that we do recognise a widespread desire to put faith into action, or the representation of Christ in this’
- ‘Fresh evidence of connection between faith and action’
- ‘Faith and action integrated – interviews perhaps indicated otherwise?’
- ‘Celebrate that report is telling us that people do want to get involved – give thanks for what is already happening’

2) Importance of getting theological understanding right

- ‘Church is the agent of God’s love, not object, and your understanding of this is what shapes your response to faith and church – love of God seen in Christ, desire to help others’

3) Barriers to articulating a Christian motivation

- ‘People might not articulate desire – reluctant to give too much – practise self-care?’
- ‘Scared of open-ended commitment/expectation that involvement is permanent’
- ‘Confidence to be active – how do you find out? Get to know each other better.’
- ‘Not doing it regularly – not [having] the right words – e.g., ‘outsider’ – self-fulfilling’
- ‘Church family – not articulating there what/why they do what they do’
- ‘Frightened to ask questions – as though you should know it already’

4) Sharing Faith

- ‘Many do want to share – so how? Own story; tell story (vocation); community of church first; ‘Time to Talk of God’ [Methodist resource]
- ‘Motivation and value can come from brokenness’
- ‘Think about how we share the Bible – make it more relatable’

5) How churches can help

- ‘Beware of the blueprints. God will find something for YOU’.
- ‘People need space to discern/listen to God’.
- ‘How can we help people to see what they do on a Sunday is linked to how they act during the week?’
- ‘People’s life experiences can be motivators – their experience of healing can create a desire to work for this for others’
- ‘Taking a risk! On people/initiatives/new activities’.
- ‘Take a step back to look at what people in church are doing, and recognise how these activities are having an impact on the life of the church and wider community’.
- ‘Value people’s skills and abilities (outside of tea-making!)’

- 'Have clear expectations on commitment and make it OK for people to withdraw'.
- 'Make home groups spaces for reflection on action'.
- 'This Time Tomorrow' – keeping up the practices, intercessions. People can see 'better models' of community/care'.
- 'This Time Tomorrow' exercise (LICC) – you discover what people do – brings the world into the liturgy, affirms people's life beyond church, brings a different voice'.
- 'The 5th Gospel' – what have you done this week, and where did you see God?'
- 'Where have I encountered God consciously beyond church in the last week?'
- Talk about God – what is God doing (not church, or faith)
- 'Avoid the usual suspects' and 'set an egg timer – e.g., 3 mins!'
- 'Discipleship and calling – do you need the calling first? Seeing needs, identifying gifts [is important]
- 'Recognise hinterland of church – fellowship not membership'
- 'How can people come back after discouragement or disengagement?' (Being part of a team can help).
- 'Recognise our starting point - Asset based community development (realistic)'
- 'Church growth to those like me [numbers] – or wider community 'depth, variety'
- 'church can make space for pioneering growth – conversations, connections, 'I'm an atheist but I want to help'
- 'Vicarpedia' in the pub – time to meet people and ask questions
- Be honest – 'I'll find out/look it up with you'
- Take into account the reading age of the population – liturgy is too complicated. Consider needs of visual learners. Mosaic creative tool.
- 'Work with what you have – people, their skills, your context'
- 'Specific training about being prepared to share faith in the context of community activity'.

LEARNING/GROWING: What kinds of growth would you hope to see from community activity? How can people's growth and learning be recognised? How can their growth be facilitated? What simple changes could churches make to help people learn and grow from their community activity?

1) Areas considered to be connected to growth:

- 'Justice, wholeness, warmth, connections, discernment, confidence, awareness of needs, prayer life'
- 'Empathy, character, learning through community'
- 'Entering God's mission in or beyond the church'
- 'Joining in with God's mission – we learn about God'
- 'empathy, patience, [character, faith independent'
- 'reframing our understanding of complexities of life'
- 'social growth – relationships, community and capital'
- 'growth in God's kingdom – justice, wholeness, sense of purpose, warmth of spirit, growth in connections, integration of the "fringe"'
- 'discernment, understanding, learning, confidence'
- 'growth in awareness of different needs in the community and bringing it into prayer life'
- Reflection question: 'Did we do anything in the last week we recognise was motivated by faith?'
- 'Importance of theory (theology) AND practice (working in the community)'

2) Recognising learning and growth

- ' "Certificate" for learning'
- 'How can we normalise our language?'
- 'people get stuck – people don't see the change – might give space to grow'.

3) Facilitating growth

- 'what is "normal" – movement, institution, ordinary theology, ecclesial (formal) theology'
- 'Marking values, achievements, community awards'
- 'Leaders need to make sure people are aware that what good works they already do is part of their vocation, without their realisation'
- ' "Mentoring" could be usefully employed and made available'

VOCATION – How does a sense of vocation empower people to act in the community? How could churches respond?

- ‘Give confidence in own language, instead of church language?’
- ‘Discernment... noticing where people may be in a vocation without realising’
- ‘Ordinariness of most ministry... a good mother, a good grandfather... ‘with God language added’.’
- ‘Why do people feel they need support to discern their vocation?’
- ‘How can churches hear? Ask, be interested, engage’.
- ‘How do we talk about what we already do and don’t need to teach church/theological language, but to give confidence about our own language?’
- ‘Sometimes people want to be told what to do, or think they do – how can churches encourage reflective practice to help them discern what they want?’
- ‘How does a sense of vocation empower? By not seeing vocation as fitting into a certain role – i.e., ordained ministry – what about teaching, etc.?’
- ‘Do we need to think about why people say they need help to discern vocation? Is it about the language we use that makes it too narrow or unobtainable?’
- ‘loving relationships, being called by name, can be key to the offer a church makes’.

An early piece of practical action as a result of the research

- A church member from one of the churches participating in the research told us of what they had now done as a result of seeing the results of their congregation's survey. Key points from the feedback had been put up at the back of church for people to read. A discussion on the findings had taken place in the PCC, and the church was now looking at practical steps to support people who wanted to get more involved in practical action in their communities, but didn't feel confident enough to take this step on their own.

Ideas for Connecting Discipleship and Community Engagement in church

- A 'this time tomorrow' type slot focusing on community activity, as well as focusing on work and workplaces
- Importance of hearing the community prayed for (in specific ways) in intercessions
- Affirmation of the importance of community engagement through what is on the screen/noticeboards in church
- Using sermon slots as opportunities for group discussion on community
- Visiting people for the sake of visiting – just to find out about their lives (not just to give people a job to do!)
- Church leaders visiting people in the context of their community work – not just at home or at work
- 'Servicing the ordinary lives of people in prayer – not just doctors, etc.'
- 'The language and the words we use to connect – how is, e.g., 'discipleship' helpful or obscure?' (importance of getting right the interplay between our own language and that of 'experts')
- 'We often try what our friends tell us about – is the opportunity for church leaders to meet around this stuff?'

Ideas for Future Work

Creating Spaces for hearing about discipleship and community engagement

- A couple of years ago the Church of England Birmingham ran a large-scale discipleship event with an opportunity for people from different churches to come together in small groups to share something of their story, with the groups using a creative listening method. 'Everyone has a story' felt like a huge success to all those involved in it. Could a similar methodology be offered to churches as a way of beginning to hear people within and beyond the usual congregation talk about their involvement in their communities, and how they connect it to their faith and values? (need to find low-cost but high-impact way of helping people articulate these things).

Sharing Faith

- A related key area for further work is in helping people become skilled and confident in articulating why we do what we do as followers of Jesus.

Practical Communication of information/opportunities/research

- It felt to many participants as though much good work in this area never got through to ‘the people in the pews’, often getting stuck on a vicar’s desk through lack of time or interest. How can we find better ways of communicating news, information and good stories?

Supporting others in exploring vocation

- Further resources around discernment (given that ‘helping me work out what my calling is’) was the thing respondents most wanted help with from their church. This includes retrospective discernment of a calling which may be already being lived out, as well as discernment of what might come next.
- Understanding more about why people feel they need support in discerning their vocation.
- ‘Would love a book of ordinary people’s stories of community activity and engagement – a genuine range of stories’ [‘Life on the Frontline’ and ‘Fruitfulness on the Frontline’ do this, particularly the former]

Prayer and Worship

- Where does this conversation engage liturgists and those who write songs and hymns? Wouldn’t it be good to explore how they can affirm and value community engagement in what they write?

Current Church Priorities

- How could this research be shared with those involved in large-scale church plants/resource churches, etc.?