

# What Helps Disciples Grow: Tuesday 19<sup>th</sup> April 2016

## Workshop Five: Experience and Testimony

Simon Foster

Direct experience of God's intervention is one significant factor reported in *What Helps Disciples Grow*. In this workshop I planned to ask a range of questions. As well as:

- *In what ways have we seen church acknowledge this?*

I planned to explore:

- *In what ways have we seen church fail to acknowledge/celebrate this?*
- *Do we see it happen anywhere else, outside church?*
- *Should we do more to encourage Christians to share such experiences?*
- *If so, how?*
- *Any other comments*

The discussion in response to the first question was so rich that it continued to unfold throughout almost the whole hour, though it moved into how to encourage testimony, too, and into questions of discernment.

This is my transcript of my notes but there may be errors. I've often included people's names, especially when they refer to an experience or resource that may help other.

### **Attendance:**

Catherine Nancekievill

Jonathan Kimber

Jenny Ellis

Simon Howard

Alison Richards

Ricard Cooke

Esther Elliott

Hazel Charlton

Dominic McLean

David Carpenter

Nick Stanyon

Beccy Allen

Simon Foster

## We began with the question: ‘in what ways have we seen churches acknowledge experience of God, and make room for speaking about experience of God

Simon Howard: we have made time for **testimony at the end of church**. Sometimes people use this time, sometimes they don’t. Yet it’s been empowering for people to learn to speak their own story, and hear others do the same.

**Jesus and 4 Gospels:** a home-grown discipleship course which has gathered a group from a network of local churches, *Jesus and the 4 Gospels* lasts five weeks. Each week the group gathers, each member having read the whole of the relevant gospel in preparation. Each week the group responds to the question, how do we know Jesus from this gospel. In the fifth week, the question ‘how do we know Jesus now?’ invites reflection, experience and testimony.

Nick: We created a **Songs of Praise service**, inviting people to choose hymns that they valued, as part of their story of faith. Works best giving the whole service over to one person, as they’ll usually find things to say about several hymns; so it becomes a ‘Desert Island Discs’ format. This was done in a Sunday evening service space, and we saw attendance in that space grow quite rapidly from less than 10 to around 40. It reached those from beyond church, and the person who was being interviewed often brought friends/family.

Esther: we did something similar in Nottingham. What was really profound was the so-called ‘ordinary theology’ that was generated when we asked a question like ‘what has the hymn taught you about God?’

[At this point a delegate challenged my use of the word ‘intervention’ in the opening question, observing that the question might be better framed as ‘how God works in the world’ rather than suggesting that the issue is ‘when’ or even ‘whether’ God works in the world. One delegate said: ‘I think of it as rock and outcrop: God is always there, underneath, but we don’t always see him openly.’ Altogether, a short helpful detour and a correction to my language. I did note that although I’d used the word intervention here, we had steered away from it in the research questionnaire itself!]

Catherine: **Cursillo** provides a formal programme which enables people to share their story.

Beccy: **Fruitfulness on the Frontline** has been positive because we’ve started with testimony; and this makes connections. It’s empowered people, to have ways of finding God in ‘my place’ and not just in church.

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## This led to questions of *discernment*.

Alison: It’s often about asking ‘is this a “God incident”’? As ministers we may see quite different opportunities to explore that, including funerals, Open Book.

Beccy: How do we set about discernment? In particular, how do we say, ‘that is *not* of God’?! As an ordinand I learnt about the process, and the skill, of discernment. But how do others learn those skills and processes, who do not get the support that is given when one explores or trains for ordained ministry?

Simon: that's a skill of spiritual direction and of Ignatian spiritual exercise.

Dominic: Diocese of Wrexham is a diocese with about 10 priests and most of the rest of the leadership is made of lay people. We use Ignatian Exercises for discernment in that setting. **Open Door** retreats (a particular way of structuring a retreat 'close to home', e.g. 2 hours per week over 8 or 9 weeks) were a useful model in this.

One delegate also spoke of bringing deaf and hearing Christians together over a period of time, to explore prayer, also over 8 weeks. The sessions went well, though at the end, the group decided they did not want to meet any further.

Jenny Ellis spoke of a **Sunday School** pattern (for adults) where members were invited to speak of their 'joys and concerns' (reflecting the Ignatian Examen tradition)

Jonathan Kimber – intriguing that we have a 'sin **confession**' at the start of our worship, but not a 'grace confession'. We do the bleak bit but not the joyful bit!

Nick (URC minister) – has in services made space for a '**good news**' time... this can be anything – 'achieving a 100m swim'; 'being healed by God'. Perceived that sometimes it became a time of discernment, as people began to identify good news elsewhere in the community, or in connection with the church's activity (ie. the good news did not always belong to the person who spoke of it)

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## We wondered about possible dangers in testimony and discernment

Catherine: It may privilege personalities who like to speak: i.e. it's self-selecting.

Richard: This kind of testimony can be easier for people in small groups

Jonathan: It's useful to seek 'treasure' rather than 'trophies'

Beccy: Maybe better to say 'how do we make it work' rather than 'it doesn't work for some'. I have used video; Q&A; and even spoken entirely for someone standing up next to me (having agreed the words in advance) – these are all ways of giving someone a voice in front of their community.

Alison: We ought to acknowledge that it is difficult.

Beccy: One rule of testimony for the minister: never let go of the microphone!

Discernment as individuals may not be the same as discernment as a church?

David: Prayer enables expectation – it underpins discernment and teaches us to look for the work of the spirit.

As the session came to an end, we arrived at a sombre reflection. Some testimony can be confusing or emotional: an example was given of the Potter's Bar train crash – following which some in church stood up to praise the fact that they were late to the station and missed the train that crashed ... but said that in a church where others were relatives of injured or dead.

**With that reminder that human matters are rarely straightforward, we came to a close. It had been a rich, positive discussion full of practical resources and experiences, along with acknowledgement of some of the hazards that we must meet and overcome in setting lay people free to talk about their experience of God.**