



WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE CHURCH?

Graham Horsley

GRAHAM HORSLEY, THE CONNEXIONAL FRESH EXPRESSIONS MISSIONER, EXPLORES THE NATURE AND PURPOSE OF CHURCH IN THE 21ST CENTURY.

What does it mean to be Church? To answer this question, we need to ask first 'what is Church for?' John Wesley saw his purpose quite clearly 'to reform the nation and in particular the church to spread scriptural holiness across the land' ('Wesley's Works 10', 845) It is important to see this big picture - Church is not there simply to help us to feel good (though that's not unimportant - see below), it's purpose is nothing less than to bring the Kingdom of God into being where we are.

From a biblical point of view, my starting point for understanding the nature and purpose of the church is Ephesians 3:14-19 - Paul's wonderful prayer that the Ephesian church would truly understand how much they are loved by God. My own story is that I came to Christ as a teenager because I met some Christians who knew that they were loved in a way that I desperately needed. When we truly know that we are loved (which paradoxically happens when we die to self and live for Christ) all sorts of things find their proper place.

SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCE

We know we are loved when God reveals his love to us. It's entirely God's initiative. When that happens, we can love God in return - not in our strength, but in his. We can choose to turn away from God's love, but we can't even do that until he reveals it to us. This is the heart of worship, an intimate encounter with God that takes our breath away, that leaves us speechless. It can happen in many different ways, but one of the important components is music that touches the heart (for me that's mostly rock/blues style - it may be different for you) and especially that touches the hearts of those who aren't yet followers of Jesus. The church has too often stuck with its own heart music and ignored the spiritual seekers outside. Gospel proclamation should be done the way that Jesus did it - parables and questions that leave people thinking rather than sermons that tell us what we ought to think.

CAN DO CULTURE

Because God has revealed his love to us in Christ, and we've been transformed by it, we are no longer limited in what we can achieve for him. Healthy churches create a culture where people are encouraged to find and exercise their ministry. Unhealthy churches exercise tight control over decision-making and participation. I vividly remember praying about my ministry at South Chadderton Methodist Church (a brilliant 'can do' church) and hearing God say, 'don't

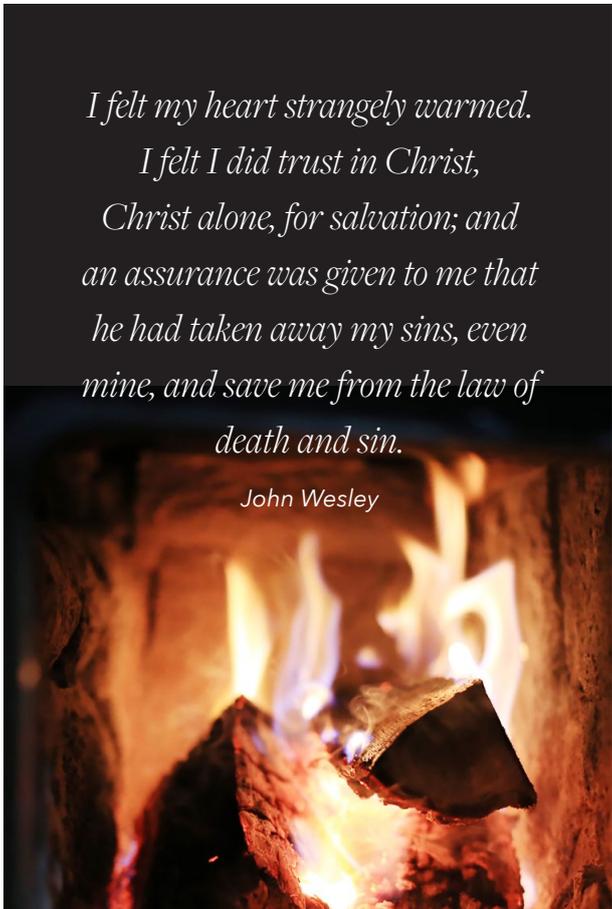
say no for the first year'. It was the most exhausting time in my ministry, but the most fruitful. One of the lessons we've learnt through the Fresh Expressions movement is that there are lots of gifted lay people with vision and passion, who can achieve enormous fruit for the Kingdom of God once they find space to work with freedom to do what God tells them to do. When we know that we are loved and valued by God, we are not threatened when others discover their gifts and do great things for God.

SMALL GROUP ACCOUNTABILITY

When individuals commit themselves to help each other to live well and have a framework in which to do it, change happens powerfully. Methodist band meetings and class meetings were the engine of the 18th century revival. The times that I've grown most as a Christian in my life, are when a small group of trusted friends have encouraged me, prayed for me and challenged me to be who God made me to be.

24-7 DISCIPLESHIP

If we measure discipleship in a 'churchy' way, we're missing the point. True discipleship equips us to be good partners and parents, good workmates and good neighbours. The reason that too many people have drifted away from church is that church was only equipping them for church - not for the rest of life. When our meetings are focused on us becoming who God created us to be, they're so much more attractive.



*I felt my heart strangely warmed.
I felt I did trust in Christ,
Christ alone, for salvation; and
an assurance was given to me that
he had taken away my sins, even
mine, and save me from the law of
death and sin.*

John Wesley



QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION / GROUP DISCUSSION

1. Where have you had your most profound spiritual experiences? How can we be a church that expects and encourages these experiences?
2. How do we respond to new ideas? How can we create a culture in which they are encouraged and supported?
3. Is accountability for the chosen few or for everyone? How can we find the level of trust required to be open about our dilemmas, doubts and failures?
4. What are the issues we face outside church that we need equipping to deal with?
5. How do we increase our passion for those who are not yet followers of Jesus? How much do we need to change our existing church activities, and what do we need to add, to be more welcoming to spiritual seekers?

PASSION FOR THOSE WHO ARE NOT YET FOLLOWERS OF JESUS

This begins with a natural sharing of love with the people we meet and a willingness to bless them (in ways they understand to be a blessing). Love people until they ask why, then share the love of Jesus with them. It's important to think about how attractive our church activities are to those who are not yet Christians and to put stepping stones in place to ease them in gently. It's also important that members regularly share what God is doing in their lives - this is even more powerful than evangelistic preaching (though this should happen several times a year).



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PASSION FOR KINGDOM VALUES

Methodism can rightly be proud of the part it has played in the Trade Union movement, in local and national politics. The number of Methodists in serving professions is also disproportionately high. I'm glad that the divide between evangelism and social action, that characterised our worst period in the 1970s, has gone and that evangelicals recognise the need for political action and liberals recognise that it's important that people become followers of Jesus. Wesley's original goal to reform the nation through the spread of scriptural holiness is still vitally important. Church

must always seek to bring healing to those who've been hurt by injustice as well as working to remove the source of the injustice.

Graham was led to Christ as a teenager by students from Cliff College. Ever since, he's had a passion for creating the sort of Church that people who don't yet know Jesus would want to join. He was called to the Methodist ministry whilst a student and has worked in a number of churches as well as resourcing evangelism, church planting and Fresh Expressions from within the Methodist Connexional Team.

