God: Some Conversations
How do you speak about God?

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Participant Papers

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*How do we listen to young people speak about God?*
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Synopsis

Leading youth work practitioners and writers like Andrew Root and Dr Mark Scanlan argue that young people are the interpreters of culture around us and that the church benefits from being in dialogue with them, enabling conversation and listening, recognising that we always have to learn from each other. They maintain that adolescence is a specific time of human development and identity formation during which faith and relating to God is expressed in particular ways that can be inspirational for the rest of the Church. Therefore, listening to young people speak about faith and God is important for the health and future of the Church. How do we do that when many churches do not have young people in their midst and research is showing that among young people the curiosity about questions of faith, religion and God is low.

In this essay I am briefly drawing on the work of Mark Scanlan and Andrew Root who show the importance of engaging with, listening and learning from young people. I address the question of ‘how’ we listen by referring to research by Youthscape, a Christian charity that resources youth ministry in the UK and drawing on two extended conversations with Christian youth work practitioners.

I conclude that listening to young people speaking about God is vital for young people’s spiritual and emotional development and for the health of the Church, as it is wrestling with new questions and interacting with people in new ways. The ‘how’ we listen is primarily about creating safe spaces, tools and structures that enable young people to reflect on their experience and integrate knowledge to enable understanding. It is equally important that they feel valued and understood.

How do we listen to young people speak about God?

Introduction: Listening

The school chaplain in the independent school I interviewed for this essay was very moved by the question of this essay and especially by the word ‘listen’. He has been in the school for more than ten years, teaches R.E and is a much-valued pastor, counsellor, spiritual guide and priest. Every year he prepares 15-20 young people for confirmation. Why was he so moved by the word ‘listen’? Because he realised that he was operating with a mindset of ‘I think I know young people, I talk as if I know all about them’ and that this may get in the way of deeper listening.

The Rule of Benedict provides important wisdom for the way we relate to one another and live together. ‘Listen’ is the first word of the rule. Learning to ‘listen with the ear of the heart’ is at the centre of the Christian life. This involves being attentive to all aspects of life and people. In fact, St Benedict teaches that it is often younger members of the community who have important insights for the rest of the community.
Why listen to young people?

Dr Mark Scanlan, experienced youth worker and author of ‘An interweaving Ecclesiology, The Church, Mission and Young people, 2021 argues that the Church is always both institution and movement. There are the instituted traditions of the church, core teachings and practices, which are handed down, and at the same time the Church is called to be a pilgrim, attending to the work of the Spirit, which involves wrestling with new questions and interacting with people in new ways. ‘The gift of the youth ministry tradition back to the wider church is the reminder that the Church is always to be moving into new spaces, and that’s particularly pertinent in the world of young people.’ Andrew Root¹ talks about young people as interpreters of the culture all around us. ‘So if young people are that hermeneutical location, as cultural interpreters, then it invites the Church to wrestle with new questions and new kinds of thoughts and patterns of life, that sees the life of the Church expand….what that means in terms of practice most clearly, is the importance of dialogue, of conversation, of listening, and recognising that there we always have something to learn from each other.’²

In addition, Mark Scanlan argues that ‘the specific experience of youth is ...not problematic but ... vital to developing an understanding of what it is to be and become human. In the light of this, it is pertinent to ask what might be the particular theological contribution of this ultimate context of young people. In other words, if there is a specific time of human development and identity formation that occurs during the period we call adolescence, roughly the teenage years, then what particular ways of expressing faith and relating to God might be more apparent during this stage as opposed to others?’³

J, an experienced church youth worker in London, strongly agrees with Mark Scanlan’s proposition that the Church gains from listening to young people because of the particular ways they engage with faith and God due to their developmental stages. She says “young people bring a certain fearlessness and recklessness, when applied to relationship with God, which is inspiring. There is a lack of jadedness and nostalgia, but enthusiasm for possibility, imagination and energy – insights and wisdom that are fresh, a bit edgy, different. They seek authenticity.⁴ We are enriched by hearing what God is saying to young people in their lives”.

How do we listen to young people speak about God?

In 2016 Youthscape⁵ conducted a research project to find out the questions that young people today are asking about faith and religion. What they discovered was that young

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¹ Andrew Root ‘Revisiting Relational Youth Ministry’, Intervarsity Press, 2007
² Dr Mark Scanlan, Dr Lucie Shuker in conversation, Youthscape Blog, 2021
³ Dr Mark Scanlan- Equal opportunity for mission and ministry, ANVIL: Journal of Theology and Mission Vol.34, Issue 2, 2018, p.7
⁴ I am aware that authenticity is VERY important for young people and this essay does not have the scope to explore this. This is particularly relevant for the way the Church engages with equality, sexuality and justice issues, especially climate justice
⁵ https://www.youthscape.co.uk/ Youthscape Centre for research ‘No Questions Asked’ The findings from a qualitative study of 16–19-year-olds in Luton
people, when provoked, had some questions, but they were not forthcoming, and they did not seem particularly motivated to find out the answers. The researchers were struck by the lack of curiosity to seek answers in relation to faith and God. However, they also observed that the young people’s interest increased over the course of the interview. Some of the young people expressed how much they had enjoyed the interview experience.

“They were clearly not averse to talking about faith and spiritual matters once the conversation got going. Indeed, most of the young people were able to recount a ‘spiritual’ experience from their past and had prayed at some point in their lives. Often these moments had passed by without reflection. The interview seemed to be the first time that the young people were asked about what they believed, and the first time they were provided the opportunity to reflect on their past experiences, which led to more questioning.”

As a result of this study, Dr Phoebe Hill, who led the ‘No questions asked’ research project, conjectures whether safe contexts for questioning may stimulate curiosity. She proposes Leo Casey’s five characteristics for fostering curiosity in an educational setting as a possible framework for listening to young people speaking about God. Casey’s five characteristics are:

- Encourage inquisitiveness
- Create a safe space
- Provide conceptual tools
- Harness knowledge and experience
- Facilitate peer discussion.

In what follows I will provide three examples from different youth work contexts that show some or all of these characteristics at work to facilitate listening to young people speak about God. The first is based on the learnings from a research project that invited 16 young people to think about questions in relation to faith, religion and God. As part of my own research for this essay I had extended conversation with two experienced youth ministry practitioners, a chaplain in an independent school and a church based youth worker, asking them to respond to the question of this essay.

Youth work example One: Learning from the ‘No questions asked’ study

The methodology of the research project created a safe space and structure for young people to think about questions in relation to faith, religion, God. The one characteristic not in place here was the facilitation of peer discussion. The study consisted of one-hour interviews with 16 young people between the ages of 16 and 19 in Luton schools, carried out in 2016. Eight young people were from a Catholic secondary school, many of whom were studying RE A level. The other eight people were from a FE College mostly taking vocational courses. About half the students were either Christian or Muslim and the other half non-religious. The group was ethnically diverse. The interviews existed of three different sections.

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6 Dr Phoebe Hill, Youthscape Blog, March 2020 ‘Fostering spiritual curiosity in young people: revisiting ‘No questions Asked’ research
7 Leo Casey, “Questions, Curiosity and the Inquiry Circle,” E-Learning and Digital Media 11, no.5 (2014): 512
8 The students studying for RE A level had more religious terminology at their disposal and showed an understanding of key tenets of different religions.
The first used an activity to open up conversation with the young people by inviting them to do a ranking exercise, asking them to out in order of importance the following: popularity, appearance, relationship, sports, success, money, intelligence, education, job, spirituality, faith, friends, health, happiness, family. Once they had finished the ranking and the interviewer had discussed what they had done, they presented four big questions on cards, which would make up the majority of the interview:

- What does the word ‘religion’ make you think of?
- Could you describe some of your hopes and dreams for the future?
- What do you think about the idea that God, or gods, exist?
- Have you ever had a moment in your life which you would describe as spiritual?

The young people were able to choose the question they wanted to begin with, and once they were satisfied with the discussion round the question they would pick where they went next.

In the final part of the interview the interviewers asked the young person ‘On a scale of 0-10, 0 being never and 10 being all the time, how often do you think about these topics and questions?’

I have already mentioned that one of the learnings from this study was the suggestion to use Casey’s five characteristics for fostering curiosity.

A second important learning was that young people associate faith and religion with practical and concrete experiences, whether these are their own or others, over and above theoretical or propositional belief systems. The students seemed to be interested in practical life, where and when they might think about God in relation to events in their life, which includes thinking about the usefulness of God. For example, a majority of the young people brought up the subject of the death of a loved one – family or friend, which had led them to pray and ponder the existence of the afterlife. “It was these three themes -prayer, death and afterlife – which came up time and time again in the interviews and seemed to be the most ‘spiritually’ significant and important for the young people.”

This raises interesting possibilities for creating spaces for listening to young people talk about God, such as prayer rooms that provide resources to engage with questions of loss and death. It confirms the importance of creating safe spaces for young people to engage with their experience and to develop understanding.

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9 Family ranked highest (200), then happiness (165), Health (155), Friends (140), Faith (135), Spirituality (130) ...at the bottom Relationship (75), Appearance (70), Popularity (65) -for more details see https://www.youthscape.co.uk/research/news/nqa1
10 The researchers heading for the results of this part of the interview is ‘Religion is not a hot concern’. Question 1 above scored ~4.1, Q 2: ~7.7, Q 3: ~5.1, Q 4: ~5)
11 ‘No questions asked’ report, p. 30
12 Ibid, p.34
Youth work example Two: Chaplaincy in an independent school with boarders & day pupils

Each year, the chaplain invites students in year nine (aged 14-15) to write a ‘life poem’ inspired by Ed Sheeran’s song ‘Castle on a hill’. It enables the students to reflect on their lives so far. Many of the young people write rich and moving poems. The chaplain made a point of speaking of this at length to me, when I asked him how he listens to the students speak of God. The majority of the students do not come from families where faith is practiced, and the poems do not overtly speak of God. But they enable the young people to reflect and connect with their experience of life so far and their inner life. For some students, this generates the curiosity to explore questions of meaning and faith more deeply, which becomes a possibility in a school environment that provides a chaplain. The poems show what is important to the young people. Several of them include references to family members or friends dying, something that the chaplain pointed out to me. The project enables the chaplain to pay closer attention to the emotional and spiritual needs of the students. The chaplain has shared five of the poems with us – see Appendix 1.

A second example from this context is a conversation among the students of the chaplain’s religious studies GCSE class, which he initiated and recorded for me.

This is another example of an environment that meets Casey’s five characteristics and therefore generated a rich and informative conversation. The young people were happy to comply with the chaplain’s request to have this conversation about God and for it to be recorded and shared with me. An abbreviated transcript is attached as Appendix 2. I think the way the students respond to the questions, which are primarily about belief, resonates with the findings of the ‘No questions asked’ study – that young people are not especially concerned about these questions or whether religion will be with us in the future.

Youth work example Three: Church youth group in an Anglican Church in London

When I put the question of this essay to this youth worker, she spoke at length about an Easter project ‘Stations of the Resurrection’ which her youth group were invited to create for the whole church. For this project the youth worker invited members of the youth group to engage with five resurrection stories, with the aim to create physical stations in the church building, which members of the congregation could engage with during a Sunday parish eucharist. The young people would be present at their stations, able to respond if church members had questions and wanted to engage in conversation with them.

For this youth worker ‘listening to young people speak about God’ is all about creating safe spaces and structures or processes that enable young people to engage with questions of faith. Attentiveness and non-judgemental listening are also important, and for young people to be able to participate as fully as possible in the life of the church. Members of the youth

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13 The opening words are ‘when I was six years old, I broke my leg, I was running from my brother and his friends and tasted the sweet perfume of the mountain grass I rolled down..."
group are keen to contribute to the life of the whole church whilst nervous about it at the same time.

In order to create the stations of the cross the young people were asked to reflect on five resurrection stories. They were invited to ask questions such as ‘what do you think the key ideas are?’, ‘what do you think God is saying to us today?’, ‘what do you think you could learn from this story?’ The young people spent time thinking on their own, and then together in the group. The youth worker listened to the conversation and wrote it down, in relation to each story, checking with the young people that she had heard them correctly. The youth worker was struck by how deeply the young people engaged with this project and the profound insights that emerged.

For example, one young person was particularly drawn to the story of the Road to Emmaus, and how the disciples recognise Jesus in the breaking of the bread. She was making connections with her own experience of eating with family and friends; that this is how she knows what God feels like, as she knows God’s presence in that meal and in the breaking of bread. As the young people were helping her to articulate what she was feeling and thinking, together they came up with this wonderful phrase ‘Breaking bread is Jesus’ signature move-this is how we know God works. This is how I recognise Jesus in my life, through time spent with good food and family and friends, like a picnic in the park.’

The Stations of the Resurrection project in this Church was a first – both for the young people and the adults who engaged with them during Sunday worship. Many of the adults expressed surprise and delight about the commitment and depth of engagement of the young people. The process enabled the young people to develop their understanding of God and faith; the adults were enriched as they saw the stations and listened to the way the young people made connections between the bible stories and their own lives.

Other examples from this youth ministry context for listening to young people speak about God is creating space for prayer, for example the creation of prayer book where young people could creatively express what is important to them. In the season of Advent, she invited the young people to choose songs that for them would relate to the Advent readings. Some chose Christian songs; one chose a Lady Gaga song. This project again was aimed at giving the young people a structure to make connections between their lives and the Christian Faith. For young people being able to understand and being understood is vital for their spiritual growth and sense of belonging. In the words of this youth worker: “Having an experience of being understood by people around us profoundly mediates the experience of being understood by God. Being accepted by a church community can feel like being accepted by God.” Young people look for authenticity in what is said and practiced. “They will know that God loves us through the love we see for each other.”

**Conclusion**

I started this essay with the proposition that young people have a great deal to offer to the Church, in the way they engage with and interpret contemporary culture, whilst they benefit greatly from being listened to as they are making sense of their emotions and experiences. My exploration of the question ‘how do we listen to young people speak about God’
resulted in the learning that this is primarily about creating safe spaces, with the conceptual tools and structures that foster curiosity and enable young people to make connections with their knowledge and lived experience. Being able to do this in conversation with their peers, in a non-judgemental environment is important – enabling young people to grow in understanding and to feel understood. For this to be authentic, the adults doing the listening must themselves be willing to receive and learn from the young people with the possibility of being changed by it.

I am left with the question how do we create these spaces for listening and engagement with young people in our churches? I believe we have a great deal to learn from specialised youth workers or youth ministers, from schools and school chaplaincies. The example of the church youth worker in London is encouraging. Her goal is to contribute in her church to the creation of a church culture in which everyone’s experience is valued and every voice is encouraged and listened to, a church culture that assumes everyone has something to say about God.

Bibliography


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Mark Scanlan ‘An Interweaving Ecclesiology, The Church, Mission and Young People’ SCM Press 2021


Dr Mark Scanlan, Dr Lucie Shuker in conversation, Youthscape Blog, 2021

Youthscape Centre for Research ‘No Questions Asked’ The findings from a qualitative study of 16–19-year-olds in Luton, 2017
Appendix 1: Pupil’s life poems

A selection of Life Poems:

Using the lyrics from the song ‘Castle on the Hill’ by Ed Sheeran as the framework, the Chaplain invites pupils to express their ‘life poem’ of how they have come to this stage.

**Poem 1:**

When I was 5 years old I broke my thumb I slammed it in the car door.
When I was 6 years old my Grandad died and I could not go to the funeral as I was to young.
When I was 7 years old my family left the UK and moved to Switzerland.
When I was 8 years old my 3 best friends all left me as they had to move away.
When I was 13 I dislocated my thumb while sledging and had to suffer the 2 hour car ride to the hospital in pain.
When I was 14 I broke my collar bone playing rugby.
When I was 14 my grandma passed away in my moms arms.

**Poem 2:**

There Is Never A Time, That's Not Now
The Mistake
Your Attitude Towards Life
Today I
Have a task after task after task
Be The Best That You Can Be
People say
If I Can
Do More
What I live for is meaningful
But if I can’t then it’s disappointing
There is no right way to live life
I say to myself
When I was 11 I got food poisoned
That once child I was had to grow up
And face reality because life throws anything at you
I sit here today knowing that
I could have stopped myself from getting food poisoned
And then getting a medical problem
But I wouldn’t have grown in to the person I am now,
I take a look at what I once was,
Ill, sad and annoyed
not being able to go with my friends
Not going to school to learn
Not being who I want to be
Standing here tall,
tells me that I WILL rise after every fall.
Poem 3:

At 6 years old I barely understood,
Always laughing like there’s no tomorrow,
Laughing and giggles through the wood.
Not realising that another day saved for a sorrow.

Met my two best friends for life,
I want to always keep them close,
Cried a couple times over when we had a strife,
Never ending the game of ‘got your nose’.

Moved schools a couple times,
Met new people to know and see,
Thought I found the right one of mine,
Thought I found my place to be.

At 14 Changed my identity once or twice,
The comings and going’s of mental health,
Not knowing whether I’m fire or ice,
Not knowing my own self wealth.

My next step is to find my way,
Whether to have a life in this country or another,
Figure out if I’m to go or stay,
Should I follow after my oldest brother?

Poem 4:

When I was 7 I moved to a new house, it had a bigger garden with lots of things for us to do, it was near Christmas, so we had to lots of unpacking before all the presents.

At Christmas we got given a football, me and my brother played all the time and played for school as well.

5 years later at 12 years old I moved into the top of the prep school and became deputy head of house, playing for the year 8 rock band at school events was fun. Became captain of hockey and was the standout player in all sports due to the school’s lack of people and ability.

When I moved to XXXX, I found a part in the rugby team and made good friendships, playing hide and seek in the dark in the big year 9 dorm and watching friends drink hand sanitiser on the table. That was the result of Covid.

I am now part of the hockey and cricket a team playing a large role.

In my future I hope to be a prefect and a sports captain, with A levels in something to do with DT
Poem 5:

At 3 years old it all began in London
Although to Suffolk it took off
Yet mum and Dad split
Which is fine no matter how many apologies I get

At 8 my favourite person died
The person I was closest to
Cancer stole his presence
And turned him into memories

At 11 I left primary school
High school had begun
Although bullies kept me from having fun
Leaving was pretty cool

At 12 the Prep School
Fond memories of double art
Now the college at 14
Things begin to go downhill

But hopefully they will climb back up

Appendix 2: A conversation about God by a group of Religious studies GSCE students in an independent school initiated by the Chaplain to support the research for this essay

The Chaplain was present and asked the questions and just listened.

Abbreviated transcript:

Chaplain: So, who is God?

Students:
someone you can rely on
God is to good to be true – someone benevolent, but then what about all the suffering?
I don’t think God exists
If God is so all loving, then why is there all this suffering?
God makes too many mistakes.
God is beautiful if he does exist.
God is more bad than beautiful
God is not logical – it’s all too random
I have no opinion. There is no solid proof for or against.
Blaming things on God is pathetic – life is going to happen.
God created the world and life and gave us free will.
Then why not create just happiness; free will in a world of happiness.
What if God created the world, made something powerful that is not controlled. If you don’t suffer, you don’t’ ever feel deeply
Buddhism says suffering is caused by craving.
Suffering – you learn a lot about yourself, the people around you.
To suffer is to gain
Would you get rid of sin?
Sometimes it’s fun, fun to do stuff; to get the adrenaline; you learn from mistakes
Being teenagers is to learn; it’s okay to make mistakes
I recognise we have a lot of security now; so it’s good to learn from mistakes for the future when we have to make our own decisions.

Chaplain: What about the Jesus figure and the Bible?

Students:
Jesus is there to teach us the basics
He is a role model
Jesus is God incarnated in the flesh
Jesus came to share in our suffering
Did Jesus have favourites? …he had the power to heal people – he healed some people

Chaplain: Where does the God concept fit into your everyday experience?

Students:
When I am in Chapel – it’s a time to relax and think about God
There are little references and the symbols remind me of God
I think God is quite dated – in the last 20 years technological development has overtaken the idea
There sis the design argument: who designed this phone – was it Steve Jobs or the eye of God?
Does God agree with technology?
Did God mean for evolution to happen?
If God is all powerful then God is in charge
It has to start with something – God started the big bang
But why are there still monkeys – did they not ‘get on the train’?

Chaplain: How will future generations talk about God?

Students:
I think there will be less interest in God in the future – people are more interested in science and technology.
Christianity will certainly not die out, but it will be a lot less popular.
Christianity will die out as there will be more modernisation
ADEOLA ELEYAE

Prophetic proclamation – Preaching God's justice and hope in an intercultural context.
Prophetic proclamation – Preaching God’s justice and hope in an intercultural context.

The summer of 2020 when the world was in the throes of a pandemic seemed the most unlikely time for an awakening about racial injustice. But the death of George Floyd resonated across the world, and out of the ravages of coronavirus arose a global debate about race not seen for a generation, that was impossible to ignore and has continued since.

Whilst arguably the words such as social justice, equality, fairness and equity should be part of the lingua franca of the whole church, this has not always been the case. Over the past two years there has been a growing awareness of the Church’s responsibility to speak out on these matters. But how can it do so in a way that is meaningful and effective? This paper will briefly explore the challenge of how to speak prophetically about racial justice in the Church of England. It will do so by considering the difficulties of doing so across the whole range of its churches and provide tentative suggestions on how to approach these issues in an intercultural context.

Prior to 2020, the Church of England could hardly be said to be at the forefront of the demands for change. Its record on issues of racial justice has been painfully examined and its shortcomings highlighted in the recent report *From Lament to Action*. Although the content and the methodology of the report have been criticised, its commissioning demonstrates that the Church

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1 This is by no means an academic paper – some references within are anecdotal and some arguments and observations are based on lengthy experience working in the area of racial justice as well as my experience as a priest.
2 [https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2021-04/FromLamentToAction-report.pdf](https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2021-04/FromLamentToAction-report.pdf) accessed on 20/6/22
has finally arrived, albeit belatedly at the debate.\(^4\) The Church leadership has slowly begun the long journey towards being proactive in challenging what is widely perceived as the systemic racism in the Church, and become increasingly vocal about issues of racial injustice.

At General Synod in February 2020 during the debate on a Private Members’ Motion on the Windrush commitment and legacy,\(^5\) the Archbishop of Canterbury said that the Church of England was still deeply institutionally racist. In his presidential address to General Synod in April 2021 at the launch of the Anti-Racism Task Force, the Archbishop of York condemned racism as a sin, and said that like all sin it must be confronted with a call to repentance and with the healing reconciling promise of the gospel.\(^6\) This has been at some cost - the church has not been without its critics and speaking of such issues has been perceived as divisive - threatening even, by those within\(^7\) and outside the Church, with the Church being accused of trespassing into areas where it has no business.\(^8\) The merits of what should be said, and equally importantly how and where this should be said have been the subject of much debate and no doubt this will continue. Nevertheless, it is clear that the church cannot ignore the issues of our time. Racial injustice stands at the forefront of these issues.

As the established church the Church of England has a unique platform from which to speak into these matters both to the wider world and to its own congregations. On the surface this should be straightforward. We serve a God of justice and mercy. In Christ there is perfect freedom. Racism is the

\(^4\) This is not to say there has not been awareness of the problem. In the 2015 Lambeth Lecture the Bishop of London noted “In an increasingly international city we have a long way to go before we transcend our Anglophone, East Saxon constituency. The face of leadership of the church still does not even mirror the face of the church in the pews, let alone the life around us.”

\(^5\) GS 2156A and GS 2156B


\(^7\) For example, an open letter dated 22 April 2021 titled ‘A concerned response to the Church of England’s Anti Racism Task Force report From Lament to Action’, was sent to the Archbishops of Canterbury and York from a group of church leaders, theologians and laity within the Church of England. https://sites.google.com/view/antiracismtaskforce accessed on 20/6/22.

\(^8\) See Tim Stanley’s article How the Church of England became the Labour Party at Prayer https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2022/06/20/church-england-became-labour-party-prayer/ accessed on 20/6/22 for a recent commentary on this.
polar opposite of the freedom and equality espoused in the gospel. Prophetic preaching, as exemplified by the prophet Micah is clearly illustrated in the Old Testament. It is also a feature of the New Testament, not least in the teachings of Jesus himself. Their words challenge the hearers’ approach to justice and oppression. One would be hard pressed to argue that prophetic preaching has no place in the church. The charge to priests in the ordinal - to resist evil, support the weak, defend the poor and intercede for all in need would suggest that there is an imperative to do so.

In African American churches there is a rich tradition of prophetic preaching, often rhetorical in style, which is anchored in the common experience of their congregations. Also referred to as Exodus preaching, it delves unhesitatingly into the realms of injustice, oppression and suffering. Preaching of this kind serves an emancipatory agenda. It is dedicated to the despairing and intended to help them interpret their situation in light of God’s justice and the quest for human freedom. But the context is of course different. In the United States the brutality of slavery and segregation are seared in the national psyche in a way that it is not anywhere else. This is in contrast with the United Kingdom where the hinterland of race relations is defined to a large extent by the legacy of British colonialism. And is complicated by the additional overlay of class. There are of course similarities - the Bristol bus boycott of 1963 echoes the more famous Montgomery bus boycott just over a decade earlier, but the experience of Black people in the United Kingdom is distinct.

What is not in doubt is that the issue of racial injustice, which is common to people of colour regardless of where they are, must be addressed. Now that those in leadership in the Church of England have added their voices to the others clamouring for change they can no longer be accused of apathy. But what about in the wider church? How is this addressed internally? Is the

message that our leaders proclaim in the public square proclaimed as confidently in pulpits across the land? And is this being communicated to the pews?

Ben Lindsay rightly points out that speaking about race is not easy, and in doing so he has faced barriers of defensiveness and dismissiveness. He argues that Christians in UK churches should be angry about racial discrimination and courageous in wanting to change the situation. But it is not clear to what extent people in churches are really prepared to engage with these issues. The reality is that there is a huge disparity in the racial demographics of the church, which is directly attributable to the population distribution of people of global majority heritage in the United Kingdom. Even in large multicultural urban areas there are Church of England churches where there are no people of colour.

To speak of God, a preacher must preach faithfully in a way that is authentic and, crucially, relatable. The huge unspoken question is ‘How can these issues be spoken of in all of our churches?’. Not just those where there is diversity but in churches which are monocultural and therefore have little or no knowledge of people of colour or their experiences? Is there a way in which racial injustice can be addressed from our pulpits without being met with opposition, or at the best indifference, because these issues do not directly impact the majority of the people in the church?

There has to be a proper engagement with issues of racial justice because no matter how skilled the advocate, there will be no change unless people

11 Lindsay, B, We need to talk about Race London: SPCK (2019) pg. xxvii
12 According to the latest figures on ethnicity 87% of the people in the UK are White and 13% belong to another ethnic group - this includes Black, Mixed or Asian. https://www.ethnicity-figures.service.gov.uk/ accessed on 23/6/22
13 Chine Mc Donald observes that she is used to speaking about race in places where issues of white supremacy and racial injustice are never in question and reflects on whether it might be more meaningful to speak to those who are less informed. Mc Donald, C, God is not a White Man London: Hodder and Stoughton (2021) pg. 200.
engage. The gap between creed and deed will not be narrowed unless people feel the necessity for change in their hearts as well as their heads.

But engagement on race, racism and racial injustice is difficult and uncomfortable. There are several reasons for this.

The first is that there is an intrinsic human inclination to be defensive when criticised. Reflections on race in particular give rise to deep emotions of anger, denial and defensiveness. Particularly when they challenge entrenched positions on notions of justice, fairness and entitlement.

At the other end of the spectrum lies the rush to uncritically acquiesce to the current narrative on racism in the church in its entirety. John Root writing 30 years ago on racism in the Church of England made a valid point on this, which is often overlooked in the post Floyd debates on racial injustice in the Church. “White people,” he says, “need to take time to hear Black people’s criticism of the church but they also need to speak and if they disagree to argue. One danger at present is a high minded over-readiness to acknowledge guilt, lest we hear the dreaded allegation of racist made against us…..” The position remains the same. An unbalanced approach is distinctly unhelpful and plays into the hands of detractors. An appropriate response will not only recognize the failures of the past. It will acknowledge the efforts of people such as Canon John Collins at St Paul’s Cathedral and Bishop Wilfrid Wood, the first black bishop in the Church of England who was a strong advocate for racial justice locally and internationally and assess how to build on this work going forward.

Many of the terms currently used in the discourse on race are contested. Institutional racism, white fragility, white privilege, micro aggressions, colour-blind statements, race card, critical race theory have been dissected, analysed, condemned and interpreted in myriad ways. The language around

14 For a brief account of his work on racial justice see [https://www.stpauls.co.uk/canon-collins-and-campaign-against-apartheid](https://www.stpauls.co.uk/canon-collins-and-campaign-against-apartheid) accessed on 20/6/22.
race is frequently evolving, and this is accompanied by severe censure if the correct terms are not used, which stultifies discussion. Where there is discussion, there is often an absence of nuance. Positions are intractable and binary. Advocacy can be harsh and dismissive. People feel they have to take positions and there is no demilitarized zone.

This is by no means an exhaustive list and there are other things that have an impact on raising issues of racial justice. Race cannot be discussed in a vacuum, and it has been conflated with, and in some instances superseded by other issues of inequality, such as human sexuality. It has become entangled (and some would say rightly so) with issues such as cultural identity and income disparity. As a result there is a lack of clarity on what is being sought and why. In addition issues of racial justice are now competing with other societal problems, such as the cost of living crisis, economic disparity, the climate emergency, and other social justice issues such as gender based violence and child neglect. In such a crowded field it is difficult to justify a sustained focus on a single issue.

In spite of these challenges we must in the words of the Archbishop of York “prophetically call for racial justice.” Being a second class citizen in someone else’s world, he notes, is the antithesis of belonging and the new humanity we have in Christ that the Christian faith declares. Opposing racism in all its forms is therefore a gospel imperative.  

Within the church where the scars of racial injustice remain painful and sensitive and many have unwittingly become by their action or inaction gatekeepers who have kept people out, there is no easy solution on how to do this.

But it seems there is a deeper meaning to the oft quoted verse from Paul’s letter to the Galatians - *There is no longer Jew or Greek; there is no longer

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15 Presidential address April 2021 ibid.
slave or free, there is no longer male or female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.  

It speaks to the spiritual connectivity between us all. We are all part of one body. And so our discussions on how we relate to and treat one another are not to be determined solely by notions of fairness or justice or what is right. These are all subjective, and fluid. We do not engage with issues of racial justice and highlight the suffering and deprivation it engenders just because we need to challenge unjust power structures and inequitable systems. The need to address these issues has a deeper provenance which relates to what our response as Christians should be to the predicament of fellow Christians. Racial injustice matters because we are inextricably linked through Christ. So what happens to a brother or sister of colour is of concern regardless of how diverse, or not, my church is. The logical outworking of this is that I cannot be indifferent to the way in which the structures and systems of our society adversely affect people of colour in the church (and by implication other people who are not part of the dominant culture). It becomes important to notice things, speak out and try and contribute towards change even when things lie outside the sphere of my personal experience, because it affects the whole body of which I am a part. Framed in this way speaking into issues of racial justice sidesteps accusations of merely being social activism from the pulpit.

Preaching has been defined as a means by which God reminds a society of his concern for community wellness life human dignity and freedom in a less than perfect world. Prophetic preaching highlights the plans and purposes of God for his creation. *He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.*

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16 Galatians 3:28 NRSV  
17 Gilbert, ibid.  
18 Micah 6:8 NRSV
demonstrate how to live in response to God’s call. It looks forward in hope to the fulfilment of God’s promise to restore us and the whole of creation. And it points towards our unity in Christ, our hope in glory, who lives in every Christian regardless of race.

Adeola Eleyae
June 2022
MARK GALLAGHER

*Speaking beyond verbal language*
Speaking beyond verbal language.
Ubiquitous language of graphs, memes, emojis and music as a mission field for public discussion of theology.

Instead of using the written text as the primary tool of evangelism, why are we not concerning ourselves with artistic images describing faith, God, and the texts of the bible?

In the pre-literate Middle Ages, artists created beautiful stained-glass windows depicting all manner of biblical epics, and for many, this was how the scriptures were transmitted. Although no one can predict the future, I believe the current world is about to enter a similar paradigm, not pre-literate, but post-literate. Science speaks in pictures but calls them graphs and models. Social media speaks in single word hashtags alongside pictures, videos, memes and emojis, and you would be hard pushed to find a text or direct message, which does not rely on an emoji somewhere in it as a means of conveying the intended emotion or tone. Even when it comes to books and mass learning, books are more often than not enjoyed as audio recordings and learning is often facilitated by listening to podcasts rather than reading articles. The world at large is in the process of rejecting the written word for the visual, the aesthetic, the spoken, and the audible.

For once, the church should be ahead of the curve, and in anticipation, be ready to teach through pictures once again, both visual and auditory, not dumbing down the content, but meeting people at the point of need, bringing depth and substance to the 2-dimensional symbol language in the public sphere which currently exists. Let us concentrate less on the didactic, and use sound and images as evangelistic tools, and meet the present culture with the visual and sound languages which pervade present culture.

The shortcomings of the written word in science.

The language of science often borrows from the language of faith. The language of metaphor and symbolic language find root in theological discourse, giving voice to that which is beyond us. Scientific discourse is indebted to borrowing this language. Indeed, Ruth Bancewicz summarises five overarching areas where science and faith already share a creative drive, a language, and an interpretive framework, namely: creativity, imagination, beauty, awe, and wonder. I agree fully with this stance, but on the sharing of underpinning concepts, I attest the written word is insufficient communication for these concepts. Science is lived as an art in the lab, but the written language of reporting does not show this. Research is inherently creative and imaginative, led by a quest for Truth and Beauty. Reported verbal science uses the

terminology of the technician for repetition of data points, but the creative process to make any new discovery lives in the imaginative language of metaphor and symbol. In fact, even the technical language used to report reproducible data sets, falls short of being sufficient for transmission of information. Therefore graphs, and other scientific model pictorial representation. The words associated with the graph or model merely outline one possible interpretation of the picture.

From the scientific stance, written word does not convey statistical data easily, and that is why graphical (pictorial) representations of data sets are the norm in most publications. Words help the reader analyse the data points, but the picture is needed before the interpretation. The written word can create ‘word pictures’ but it takes a long time to get there.

The old adage, ‘a picture paints a thousand words’ is arguably true. Those pictures are, however, a language all of their own. The graph is not simply a plot of statistical data points; it is a visual description by the author with an imposed trend line, which is an interpretation, based on best understanding of the data. This is also intended to make the reader also interpret in a certain way, explicitly: to prove or support their point. But when read by others it may evoke thought, reinterpretation, and spark other tangents of imagination for future research. What the graph says to one person, it does not necessarily say to another. The anomalous data point to be disregarded for one, is the spark of ‘I wonder why…’ for someone else who reads the paper and interprets the data in an alternate way. Yet this kind of interpretative nuance is lost in silence when not reported in words, as it was seen as unimportant by the initial author.

**Written word, tone, and communicating beliefs.**

Written word does not convey tone easily; we need non-verbal media. When speaking, we use the inflection of the voice, a furrowing of the brow, a laugh seen in the eyes, and various other paralanguage and metacommunication tools. When they are not readily available, the world today has utilised emojis to enhance the written word with images.

Although the skilled writer conveys tone through nuance, it is exceedingly difficult to catch these nuances when translating or transliterating. Brian Friel’s *Translations* insightfully addresses these problems in moving from one language to another by thinking of individual verbal languages as an opulent syntaxes, full of the mythologies of fantasy and hope, but each one grounded in the reality of the time and place where they exist. To Friel, words are not immortal; they are signals and counters which shape us and help express ‘images of the past embodied in language.’ When we move from one language, point in time, or communication form to another, something of the beauty, the mystery, the essence of the very thing being communicated is lost. This makes sole reliance upon the written word for communication of beliefs, ideas, and nuance an almost

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21 Mark Gallagher “Living words for the Lab and the Church - Seeking metaphors that connect Search - A Church of Ireland Journal, 41.2 (2018) 132-140 and Frentz, Creative Metaphors, Synchronicity and Quantum Physics, 101-104

futile and impossible quest. New thinking in science, religion, and art are all but lost without these extra tools.

One of the beauties of non-verbal language (tone, music, art, facial expression, and so on), is the ubiquity with which it can be understood. If used correctly, vehicles of non-verbal language are all images, or create a clear image in the recipient’s mind. The nuanced stroke of the painter’s brush, the musician’s tone, the imposed trend line and the anomalous data point on the graph transcend linguistic barriers. In music, a major key sounds ‘happy’ and the minor ‘sad.’ The theologian, whether ordained, academic, or lay, should re-engage this universal approach to communication and understanding. We must learn from the history and heritage of the church, and – once again – embrace the language of art and interpretation.

**Beyond verbal language: A living language of faith in art, music, and liturgy.**

It is fair to say that written language, no matter how proficient, factual, or poetic, needs extra vehicles to ensure clear communication. Understanding what is being said through the written word, as well as in image and symbol, is key to creating platforms where the church can once again speak with an intelligent, and intelligible, voice. But before we speak, we must understand our full language toolkit. If we know what we are saying, and how we are saying it inside the church, we can transfer this language outside the walls, adding something to the dialogue in the public sphere.

From here, the church can once again speak to the public sphere without sounding outdated and using a language foreign to the listener. Today, we can often be found ‘talking past’ (as it were) our dialogue partner, rather than talking to them. As we do not understand where we are speaking from, how it will be interpreted when moving across linguistic barriers already discussed. This often stems from interpretation of tone, image, symbol, and all other factors which mere typed words overlook. All of this influences our reception of what is being communicated, not just through what have been coined paralanguage and metacommunication, but through what goes beyond these, and even beyond verbal language. Beyond verbal language may be where the written or spoken word is enhanced, not just in the accepted fields of paralanguage and metacommunication, but also in music through sound, in liturgy through action, or where the artist has interpreted the words and tells the story through a different medium.

**Art**

There are numerous volumes written about art and the sacred, reading an image, and the use of sign and symbol in worship, which I do not have time to go into

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24 Mark Gallagher “Living words for the Lab and the Church - Seeking metaphors that connect” in *Search - A Church of Ireland Journal* (Volume 41.2, 2018) 132-140

25 Viladesau, *Theological Aesthetics: God in Imagination, Beauty and Art*, 75-78

26 The church has spoken in these languages in many forms over the years. Examples in art, music and liturgy are touched on here, but the scope is - of course - wider.
here. However, it is essential to highlight how images not only convey factual truth, but also profound emotional and psychological truths. They are not merely descriptive, but performative. They inspire and challenge the desires of the heart as much as they do the thoughts of the mind and the intentions of the will. From this stance, images can provide legitimate foundations for engagement with faith.

**Music**

One example in music is Handel’s glorious aria for tenor *Every Valley*, based on Isaiah 40:4-5. When the biblical text is sung to this setting, the text is embodied and understood on a deeper level. Not only does Handel write a beautiful melody and harmony, but he also fits it to the text. For the lyric ‘Every valley shall be exalted’, the music notation goes up in pitch as the lyric proceeds and does so every time these words are repeated. Likewise, for ‘and every mountain and hill made low’, the melody drops in pitch before the word low is sung. When the text moves on to ‘the crooked straight and the rough places plain,’ the tune attached to these words begins with almost spasmodic ornamentation and vocal gymnastics, before coming to rest in a simple melody and pure sustained note as the climax of the aria, presumably to represent musically how God has answered the prayer for comfort from the previous recit, and has now made the crooked straight and the rough places plain. If music is to be used as a vehicle for the listener to embody the text, it must be fit for purpose. It must pick up on, accentuate, and highlight the important themes in the text, and then let the listener or singer embody the music and lyric together on a visceral, emotional, and intellectual level at the same time.

This works when music which fits the sound patters to the glorious imagery of the lyric. Everyone joins the song, as listener, congregational singer, or participant in harmony through the choir or instruments. All embody worship which feeds and empowers the listener, opens up thought, and allows experiential learning to link into their daily lives.

**Liturgy**

Liturgy is not just the words on the page. It comes alive when embodied through the action of the priest, congregation, and space. The words on the page, and the understood meaning of the ritual, combine in tone, body language, action, art, and music, engulfing the senses to create the full language beyond mere

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27 See examples such as (a) Francis A Schaefer *Art and the Bible* (Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter Varsity Press, 1973), 26, 61 (b) John Drury *Painting the Word* (London: Yale University Press, 1999) ix-xi
28 George F Handel *The Messiah* (London: Novello and Company, Revised 1943, Composed 1741) 6-9
29 Peter Thompson, *Companion to Thanks and Praise* (Dublin: Church of Ireland Publishing, 2004) i-ii
words on the page and an experience which affects the worshipper on a base, emotional, and intellectual level at the same time.

Light is a constant source of metaphor in liturgical texts; but it carries potential for so much more: it is both metaphor and symbol of heat, warmth, illumination of the mind, and so on. The evening collect, ‘Lighten our darkness’, and the evening canticle ‘Hail Gladdening Light’ are examples of words which say very little by themselves, but when interacting with the fading lights outside, and the flickering, warm glow of candlelight inside, they speak in depths beyond any of the individual parts. Choral Evensong is an almost perfect example of where music, art, poetry, and liturgical action all combine to create a beauty which must be experienced in all its parts to be understood.

**Beyond verbal language: Shared experience in worship and meme.**

Reading a painting, icon, or stained glass window, being moved by a piece of well composed music, participating as an embodied part of the liturgy, allowing the architectural curves of a cathedral to inspire awe, all rely upon non-verbal language. Interpretation and understanding of any of these is a uniquely personal, yet somehow simultaneously corporate, tangible, and embodied, experience.

The experience is intimately personal; it subject to our own personal histories, caught up in the time and place, and embodied only by the individual experiencing the piece of art at that time, and in that place. But the experience is always communal too; the art is appreciated or critiqued by all who pass by, the hymn is communally sung, and the chorister can only create harmony when singing with others.

This is also how memes work. Words overlayed on a familiar, or easily understandable, image express otherwise complex humour or wit with an economy of image and text. They rely on a reservoir of shared experiences and understanding.

**A future speaking together in image.**

The church has the lexicon, resources, and general knowhow of thousands of years of cumulative knowledge in this area. Instead of turning our backs on it, clutching at straws and hoping to attract new people by mimicking the world outside, we should invite them to experience and embody that which the tradition already knows, understands, and can enhance their lived experience outside the church, creating a curiosity, and shared experience in traditional liturgical spaces and words, and modern arenas.

Although the world at large may not know it, they already speak in some of these languages. Images of loved ones are used when the funeral, regardless of the Christian ceremony, has an image of the deceased on the order of service, or

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31 General Synod of the Church of Ireland, *The Book of Common Prayer*, 109, 115
32 I would go as far as to say all who reflect on art, hear the hymn or aria, or commune in the liturgy, do so using beyond verbal language, and none of these cannot be experienced in solitude. It is uniquely personal, but it cannot be experienced unless shared in some dimension with others.
when a small sentimental photo of a loved one is carried in the wallet. Likewise, education and textbooks would be much smaller in almost all disciplines if the pictures disappeared. The anatomical diagram in the biology textbook not only informs the reader about the complexities of the human body, but a well-placed image has the capacity to transform it from dry text into an exciting invitation to consider the living reality which lies behind it.

**Online and post-Covid mission fields, and real life examples.**

During the Covid-19 pandemic, the church relied heavily on the visual to communicate. Yet despite the church’s rich and complex history, many churches in the digital context seemed to treat their congregations as if they were still sitting in parallel pews.

The ongoing pandemic forced churches of all traditions to think carefully and creatively about the opportunities and contingencies of online worship – or, at least, it should have done. Extraordinarily little time has been spent considering how teaching ministries of various stripes might translate to the screen.

Even if the same congregation is present online, the whole does not add up to the sum of its parts. When we worship together, we are the gathered body of Christ, yet digital worship, for all the comfort it gave, still relied upon a disembodied or differently embodied congregation. We cannot celebrate the Eucharist together when apart. It also became obvious very early on that Anglican Chant cannot be achieved by solo efforts overlayed to create a choir sound. Chanting relies upon hearing the voice beside you, adapting to, and blending with the speed, volume, vowel sound, and tone of all surrounding voices.

Within my own (and I will admit flawed) online attempts, we had creating a sense of sacred space with a candle, cross, and clerical attire, passing of the liturgy between the congregation through the throwing and catching of a toilet roll, recording individual choir voices to make a digital anthem, and harmonised hymns every week through overlaying home recordings from each individual, taking the role of a children’s TV presenter to teaching how to make advent wreaths with play dough and birthday candles, and publishing articles locally extolling the virtues of worshipping under the canopy of the cathedral of nature. Adverts, announcements, and attention-grabbing posts on parish social media rely on meme culture, as previously discussed.

In bringing my congregations ‘closer together, but apart’ during the pandemic, we moved the nativity play and the carol service outside the walls. The nativity

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34 Christopher West, *Eucharist and Embodiment: An invitation to Constructive Theological Thinking* (Dublin: Church of Ireland Publishing, 2021) 35-40

play became a treasure hunt around 10 acres to find shepherds with alpacas, wise men with horses, and all other characters, singing carols between each station. For carols by runway lights, we made a makeshift stage out of a 40 foot transport container with bright lights evocative of Christmas tree hues lighting up the stage, parking cars along the runway of the airport beside the church, The sound of congregational singing together was lost, but familiar harmonies and descants were achieved from the two voices on stage, and the sound of appreciation substituted clapping with honking of car horns. A full firework display above the spotlight illuminated church building concluded the shared experience. We became an almost assembled body, through the shared experiences of the sounds and images created these days.

These events, along with others, have brought many new families and households into the welcoming embrace of the church, as the whole community shared together in the experiences such as the image and sound of fireworks exploding above the church, or the Christmas tree hues of light while listening to comforting, familiar carols, and the unique applause of car horns. These have become shared pieces of liturgical art, however crude and crass.

Now that we are once again out and about, we should continue speaking in this welcoming and enticing visual and sound language. The scientist reads and interprets graphs, so why not engage and speak with enticing pictures worth reading and interpreting. Scientist and social media users already have the transferrable skill set to interpret this visual language. The social media user speaks in emojis and memes and is bombarded with adverts underlayed with music and images, so engage them with a language where word, art and music all combine. Engage the liturgy of the world outside the walls with the full picture of the liturgy of the world inside the walls of the church building. To paraphrase something often misattributed to St. Francis of Assisi, speak in pictures and images, and in so doing preach the Gospel. Then when necessary, use words.
DAVID GERRARD

Paying the price for the Church’s Collusion with Secularisation
Paying the price for the Church’s Collusion with Secularisation

Following the Windrush scandal, the Justin Welby addressed The General Synod and said, ‘when we look at our own Church … we are still deeply institutionally racist.’ 36 Following this address an ‘Anti-Racism Taskforce’ was set up in order to make ‘bold changes to ensure greater racial justice and equality in the Church of England.’ 37 Subsequent to the death of George Floyd and the rise of the ‘Black Lives Matter’ movement, Douglas Murray wrote an article in The Spectator entitled ‘The New Religion of the Church of England’. 38 The article pours scorn on the words of the Archbishop, the setting up of the Taskforce and the Taskforce’s proposed actions. Murray believes that there is a “new religion” in England, which he doesn’t name, but might be summarised by the term ‘woke’ and that the “tragedy for those of us who were fond of the old religion is that its leadership is intent on nothing but making it a simulacrum of the new one.” 39

Murray’s article is an example, from the right-wing of politics, of the accusation that when the church seeks to implement what could be termed ‘left-winged values’, it can be accused of simply complying with the latest trends. However, by many on the left-wing of politics, the church can be painted as a part of the established structures they seek to reform. From either point of view, the ideas of equality and progress are seen as something separate from the church and part of the ‘secular’ world, which the church either is, or isn’t, on board with.

However, it can be argued that the ideas of equality and progress are distinctly Christian values as is the idea that the world can be divided into the ‘sacred’ and ‘secular’. Therefore, when the church speaks in a way that would indicate that these values are secular and universal we are creating the very culture that allows these misunderstandings and accusations to take place.

Indeed, the ideas of human rights and equality have not been accepted by every culture around the world or throughout time. The ancient philosophers took it for granted that inequality was natural:

37 https://www.churchofengland.org/about/policy-and-thinking/our-views/anti-racism-taskforce#na
38 https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/the-new-religion-of-the-church-of-england
39 https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/the-new-religion-of-the-church-of-england
“For that some should rule and others be ruled is a thing not only necessary, but expedient; from the hour of their birth, some are marked out for subjection, others for rule.” Aristotle, 384-322 BC

In contrast to this, in the book of Genesis humans are given a unique dignity and value:

“Then God said, ‘Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.’

So God created humankind in his image,
In the image of God he created them;
Male and female he created them.”

Genesis 1:26-27 NRSV

In Genesis humanity are portrayed as made in the image of God and given a unique position to rule over the earth. While most people today would readily accept the value of each human life, in the ancient world this would be a distinctly unusual viewpoint.

The New Testament, particularly in regard to the incarnation, only adds to this value. Furthermore, at the centre of the Christian message lay another shocking claim, that God was to be found in a crucified Messiah. As Tom Holland describes, ‘That a man who had himself been crucified might be hailed as a god could not help but be seen by people everywhere across the Roman world as scandalous, obscene, grotesque.’ It was through this understanding that we came to believe that God was on the side of the victim and the downtrodden.

As the centuries past Christianity became the dominant religion across the Roman Empire. Indeed, in time the two came to be seen as almost

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40 Quoted in Glen Scrivener, The Air We Breathe: How we all came to believe in freedom, kindness, progress and equality, 2022 p.30
41 Tom Holland, Dominion: The Making of the Western Mind, 2019, p.xviii
inseparable. However, by the 5th century the Roman world in the West was in decline and many feared the collapse of Christianity along with it. It was in this context that Augustine wrote ‘The City of God’. In this work Augustine distinguished between the earthly realm, which is fragile and transient, and the heavenly kingdom, which was perfect and eternal. He went on to explain how Rome, which was the city of man, might fall, but that the church and its community was unchanging and eternal. It was through this understanding that the idea of the ‘religio’ realm and the ‘saecularia’ realm began. This divide between the secular world of politics and laws, and the sacred world of prayers and worship, is a distinctly Christian divide and would not have been understood by the ancient world, or by most cultures until the dominance of the West.

The ideals embedded in the Christian faith further transformed during the Middle Ages, through the “Gregorian reforms”. During this time the language of ‘rights’ developed as Pope Gregory VII implemented his ‘reformatio’, which included taking various assumptions of the Christian faith, such as equality, and codifying them into church, or cannon, laws. Throughout Church history there had been an assumption that Christians would act within these values, but now they were enshrined into laws. In the past it was expected that those with wealth would give to those in need, but now those in need had a “right” to that help. The idea that all people are equal before the law did not develop in the modern enlightenment era, but in medieval Christendom.

Pope Gregory VII also further cemented the ‘secular’/’sacred’ divide. When the Holy Roman emperor Henry IV appointed bishops, Pope Gregory excommunicated him and Henry was forced to beg for forgiveness and readmission to the church. This enforced the argument that there was the sacred world of the church, ruled by the Pope, and the secular world of the state, ruled by the King, and the ruler of one did not have rights to dictate the doings of the other - the separation of church and state can be seen here.

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42 This is argued in more detail in Tom Holland, Dominion: The Making of the Western Mind, 2019 p.159-160
43 This is argued in more detail in Glen Scrivener, The Air We Breathe: How we all came to believe in freedom, kindness, progress and equality, 2022 p.120 and in Tom Holland, Dominion: The Making of the Western Mind, 2019 p. 209-215
44 This is argued in more detail in Vishal Mangalwadi, The Book that made your World: How the Bible created the soul of western civilization, 2011, p.343
Over time the West came to dominate the world. As they did so they also spread the idea of the ‘sacred’/‘secular’ divide. For example, when the British came to India, they soon declared that the Indians had a Hindu religion, which was separate from the secular. As Tom Holland explains: “To Protestants, the essence of religion appeared clear: it lay in the inner relationship of the believer to the divine. Faith was personal, a private thing. As such, it existed in a sphere distinct from the rest of society: from government, or trade, or law … That other societies too could be divided up in this manner might - to people less self-confident than the British - have appeared far-fetched: for it was, in truth, a most distinctive way of seeing the world. Nevertheless, to officials in India possessed of a scholarly turn of mind … the conviction that such a thing as a ‘Hindoo religion’ existed was simply too useful to abandon.”

Through this process the idea that there was a ‘secular’ sphere, separate from the ‘sacred’, spread around the world. What grew from a clear Christian root, beginning with Augustine’s ‘City of God’ had become a “universal” view of the world, which kept Christianity in a defined space, separate from such matters as government, trade, education and law.

Furthermore, as the Western civilisation grew in dominance, it was not only its worldview, but also its values that were exported. For example, the abolitionist movement grew from a Christian base, leading to the ban on the slave trade in 1833 in the British Empire. Soon a movement grew to export this value to the rest of the world. However, seeking to persuade the non-Christian world that all people were made in the image of God and therefore slavery was immoral would likely be unsuccessful. As such, a new category was formed, as the salve trade came to be labeled as a ‘crime against humanity’: ‘a crime against humanity was bound to have far more resonance beyond the limits of the Christian world than a crime against Christ. A crusade, it turned out, might be more effective for keeping the cross well out of sight.’

Through this process the Christian world had de-Christianised its own worldview, turning biblical morality into ‘human rights’ and ‘crimes against humanity’.

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45 Tom Holland, *Dominion: The Making of the Western Mind*, 2019, p.400
46 A process described I more detail in This is argued in more detail in Glen Scrivener, *The Air We Breathe: How we all came to believe in freedom, kindness, progress and equality*, 2022 p.149-166 and in Tom Holland, *Dominion: The Making of the Western Mind*, 2019 p. 367-370
47 Tom Holland, *Dominion: The Making of the Western Mind*, 2019, p.418
48 The argument briefly outlined here, that Western values grow clearly from Christian roots, can be found in a wide range of literature. For example, Tom Holland, *Dominion: The*
It is also worth briefly mentioning, that while the ideas of equality and the ‘sacred’/ ‘secular’ divide have been briefly detailed in this paper, many other western values have also grown from distinctly Christian roots. Glen Scrivener argues that the ideas of equality, compassion, consent, enlightenment, science, freedom and progress all grow directly from a Christian worldview\textsuperscript{49} and other values could be added.

It is now widely believed that these are universal, natural, ‘self-evident’ values. This is most famous in the American Declaration of Independence:

\begin{quote}
‘We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.’
\end{quote}

As the atheist Yuval Hoah Harari states, ‘The Americans got the idea of equality from Christianity, which argues that every person has a divinely created soul, and that all souls are equal before God.’\textsuperscript{50} The truth is that the idea that ‘all men are created equal’ is not at all ‘self-evident’: ‘Without recourse to eternal souls and a Creator God, it becomes embarrassingly difficult for liberals to explain what is so special about individual Sapiens.’\textsuperscript{51}

This has led us to the current situation in which many people hold to the Christian worldview and values, but no longer hold to the Christian faith which underpins them and see no connection between the two. For example, in October 2019 Dr David Mackereth, stated at a job interview that he refused to refer to “any 6ft-tall beard man” as “madam”.\textsuperscript{52} After not getting the job he took the company to court for discrimination, claiming that he was not employed because of his belief in Genesis 1:27, that ‘God created humankind in his own image … male and female’. However, the court ruled that the

\textit{Making of the Western Mind, 2019; Glen Scrivener, The Air We Breathe: How we all came to believe in freedom, kindness, progress and equality, 2022; Vishal Mangalwadi, The Book that made your World: How the Bible created the soul of western civilization, 2011; John Ortberg, Who is this man: The Unpredictable Impact of the Inescapable Jesus, 2012; David Bentley Hart, Atheist Delusions: The Christian Revolution and its fashionable Enemies, 2010.}

\textsuperscript{49} Glen Scrivener, \textit{The Air We Breathe: How we all came to believe in freedom, kindness, progress and equality}

\textsuperscript{50} Yuval Noah Harari, \textit{Sapiens: A brief History of Humankind}, 2011, p.122

\textsuperscript{51} Yuval Noah Harari, \textit{Sapiens: A brief History of Humankind}, 2011, p.257-258

\textsuperscript{52} The news story can be read here: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-birmingham-49904997

\vspace{1cm}
doctor’s ‘biblical view of what it is to be male and female was “incompatible with human dignity.”’ Regardless of opinion on the outcome, what is of note here is that the judge singled out the Doctor’s belief in Genesis 1:27 as “incompatible with human dignity”, thus condemning the very verse from which the idea of human dignity originated.

It can be argued that there are a number of dangers involved in the current situation in which we have found ourselves, both for the church and the wider world.

There is a danger that, if the Christian faith continues to decline in the West, then there will be a corresponding decline in belief in these values and a lack of resources in which to defend them when they come under attack.

For example, during the COVID pandemic Lord Sumption appeared on ‘The Big Questions’ TV programme and caused controversy by stating ‘I don’t accept that all lives are of equal value.’ He went on to explain that he felt that the lives of his children and grandchildren were of more value because they had longer to live. Later he clarified that ‘It doesn’t mean that people are morally worth less; it doesn’t mean they’re worth less in the eyes of God or in the eyes of their fellow citizens.’ At the time of the original comment Deborah James shared the thoughts of many in her reaction, stating ‘Who are you to put a value on life? In my view, and I think in many others’, life is sacred.’ Her reaction against the statement would be shared by many.

However, to defend the statement the word she reached for was ‘sacred’. How is this to be defended if the idea of human equality is not based upon the image of God in each person, but on a shared human myth? Harari argues that human rights do not exist outside of the human imagination: ‘There are no gods in the universe, no nations, no money, no human rights, no laws and no justice outside the common imagination of human beings.’ He goes on to argue that, while it could be stated that equality and human rights might be useful myths, the same could be argued for other societal structures, such as strict hierarchical structures. He even admits the danger that, if these values are nothing more than shared myths, they could easily disappear: ‘an imagined order is always in danger of collapse, because it depends upon myths, and

53 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LX1KFLbPvlY - quote found at 7:00
54 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5_gwemOMviM - quote found at 5:04
55 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LX1KFLbPvlY - quote found at 13:12
56 Yuval Noah Harari, Sapiens: A brief History of Humankind, 2011, p.30-31
myths vanish once people stop believing in them.’

When viewed in this way, there is a clear danger inherent in the idea that ‘human rights’ and ‘crimes against humanity’ are simply ‘secular’ myths. Therefore, it can be argued that the church needs to stop accepting this story and start re-emphasising the roots from which they spring - maybe the church needs to stop speaking about ‘human right violations’ and start speaking of ‘the value of those made in the image of God’; to stop talking about ‘crimes against humanity’ and start speaking about ‘crimes against Christ’.

Other dangers could also be listed. For example, today’s ‘cancel culture’ could be seen as the Christian doctrines of sin, guilt and judgement, without the corresponding Christian doctrines of repentance and forgiveness.

Likewise, there are dangers within the Church and its doctrines. For example, the ‘sacred’/‘secular’ divine could be seen as contributing to the widespread misunderstanding that Christianity teaches about a God who is “somewhere else”, but not imminent. Another danger could be that of “Sunday Christianity”, if the world is truly separated into sacred and secular, than there is every reason to separate your life in the same way. Maybe the Church should be the first to say that ‘Christianity is not a religion, it’s life’?

Another danger was seen at the beginning of this paper, as we now have the situation in which the church can be accused of jumping on societies values, even when it seeks to be more Christ-like in its life.

In conclusion, the values of equality and the understanding of the secular have risen directly out of the Christian understanding of the world. However, we have now reached a stage where that connection is no longer recognised and the price is now being paid. It is time to reclaim that which has been de-Christianised.

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58 Yuval Noah Harari, Sapiens: A brief History of Humankind, 2011, p.124
59 This is argued in Douglas Murray, The Madness of Crowds: Gender, Race and Identity, 2020, p.174-183
60 Rowan Williams warns about and discusses this misunderstanding, in light of the ‘enlightenment movement’ in https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iCxnKRa1w&t=3668s, beginning at 58:06
61 Quoted from Rowan Williams, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iCxnKRa1w&t=3668s at 28:10
CAROL GREEN

*How do you Speak about God in a parish context?*
How do you Speak about God in a parish context?

The Church of England has historically said it is a “Christian presence in every community” and that definition is still prominent on its website. Having a presence is different from speaking about God and it hasn’t been the habit for many churchgoers to find a voice to talk about him. However, a church in a community does speak of a presence and is a gathering place for people wanting quiet and to acknowledge and find their “inner silence”. This speaks of God on the one hand but it is less proactive than Jesus implies at the end of Mark’s gospel: ‘Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation’ (16.15); we are often not the Church Militant but more like the title of Ysenda Maxtone Graham’s book of the 1990s “the Church Hesitant”. The culture of the C of E in much of the country emphasises the academic practice of “apologetics” rather than Isaiah 55.12 “you shall go out with joy”.

This paper includes stories and anecdotes from parish life with confidential reflections on some of the issues here. Place names are kept but people’s names changed. We will look briefly at history and setting and how this impacts today’s possibilities. We will reflect on personalities and personal histories and how those relationships are now affecting the situation. We will look at how the more Catholic wing of the church shares the good news and the way this has affected our possibilities of speaking about God and proselytising. There is also consideration of human sexuality and the impact of the national perspective on the local church.

The Exeter Diocese began in 2010 to group its parishes into Mission Communities. It was in response to a paper entitled “Moving on in Mission and Ministry”. Yes, it was in response to falling congregations, fewer clergy and less income but as with all things there is a glass half full/ glass half empty way of looking at things. Exeter has gone for the more positive and outward looking half glass full approach of “Mission Community” title rather than say a “Cluster” more reminiscent of a chocolate and nut bar than a group of parishes tasked with sharing and telling the good news of Jesus in their communities.

I was licensed in July 2021 as the priest-in-charge (team rector designate as there is a pastoral reorganisation in progress) of the Haldon Mission Community also known as a Team after the hill y landscape between us and Exeter. It, other than the sea and River Teign which skirts around and through it, is the biggest geographical feature linking us all. Teignmouth isn’t the English Riviera nor is it posh like Dartmouth – Waitrose couldn’t survive nor Coop so now we have Lidl. There are a large number of self-employed and not many chains. The parishes consist of St Michael’s and St James in Teignmouth and the villages of St John the Baptist in Bishopsteignton and Ideford with Luton; St Nectan’s, Ashcombe and new kids on the block the parish of St Peter’s, Shaldon and St Nicholas, Ringmore.

The TR lives in Teignmouth in a fair, mature dwelling with sea views to Thatcher’s Rock. This wasn’t always the case a sign in St James Vestry reminds us that until 1279 the Rector of Bishopsteignton chose Teignmouth’s 2 curates. At this time before Teignmouth’s fashionable spell in the 19th to early 20th century the parishes were more mud, rock, fish
and occasional pillaging places for the French. Teignmouth’s two churches are only ½ mile apart and in the past an impassable marsh separated them: St Michael’s on the rock a tiny fisherman’s chapel by the sea and St James chapel originally also included a lookout tower now the oldest building in the town (1267). St Michael’s was pulled down and rebuilt by the Victorians and can hold 450, St James suffered a similar fate but was rebuilt in 1821 by an eccentric Admiral in the style of a castle to remind him of his days in North Africa.

In the past the two Teignmouth parishes vied with one another, this reached a pitch in the 1990s with redoubtable ladies saying at St James PCC that they were glad their church was like a museum. (As The Very Rev. Victor Stock once audaciously said of some of his stewards at Guildford Cathedral “death has been kind to us”). These sentiments from some strengthened the resolve of gentler souls who took the church in another direction: pastoring by Readers and assistant priests kept people generally hopeful and loyal to the church if a little sad. St Michael’s did relatively well by selling a church hall and building office, narthex and toilets at the west end taking advantage of contributions from the town’s seaside visitors. The sea ravaged the building sometimes literally and before the protective sea wall you could find your car bobbing about out at sea on leaving a service. St James was the townspeople’s church and extremely popular for occasional offices. Talk to the local plumber, car mechanic or builder and the chances are they sang in the choir and their mum married there. Today St James average age is at least 75 with attendance around 35, St Michael’s is a little younger attendance around 60 with a midweek communion service of around 15 people.

The Team consists of a Team Rector and Team Vicar. The TV lives in Bishopsteignton (the PCCs of Teignmouth thought this important though the largest population is in Teignmouth). The TV until 3 years ago was of the old school and continued to work entirely to Bishopsteignton and the villages to the extent that when a man in a dog collar appeared in the Team office the administrator did not recognise him despite being in post 5 years. This has changed steadily but surely since the new TV Mary was appointed. She is a team player and feels strongly about the need for clergy to cooperate and model that method to congregations. She and asst priest Laura worked hard during the vacancy to build good foundations for this culture. One of the keystones to that success was producing weekly video services capturing the flavour of each team church; people shared their thoughts and prayers in the adversity of lockdown. They also formed a team to ring every person they could think of to give pastoral support meaning that we have hardly lost any church membership if anything gaining in numbers. In Holy Week we carried the cross in pilgrimage around the whole team gathering some 50 people along the way it produced a sense of belonging and allowed some great conversations, we produced a video which housebound people have enjoyed.

In the today’s church supporting one another and sharing strengths and mitigating weaknesses is really important. In this way we can support and encourage each other to share the good news, we make use of talent “hotspots” and build one another up.

“All who believed were together and had all things in common” Acts 2. 44 and also Acts 20.35
In all this I have given you an example that by such work we must support the weak, remembering the words of the Lord Jesus, for he himself said, “It is more blessed to give than to receive”.

The Church of England Parish Map from the national website shows the big wealth disparities across the team. Three rural parishes are classed as relatively wealthy, three parishes Shaldon and Bishopsteignton are classed amongst two of the wealthiest parishes country wide whilst Teignmouth parishes are relatively deprived. When thinking of how to spread clergy time the population numbers are important too: of a total benefice population of nearly 20 thousand people over 16 thousand live in Teignmouth. At the time of writing the Assistant priest lives in Shaldon (nearly 2000) and TV in Bishop (2532). It is important in planning ministry work to allocate resources to the areas where the population is and not just be reactive to the area in which the cleric lives. There are more able and talented people living in the most prosperous parts of Shaldon and Bishopsteignton. In a recent Churchwardens meeting we decided to make an Open the Book team across these two parishes initially to serve them but with a view to covering Teignmouth Schools too.

Clear leadership of a large team like this is important so that people have good boundaries, consistent decision making and a means of settling disputes. A number of parishioners say that the two previous TRs here were “lovely men” people who you would “Love to have at your sick bed in hospital”- it was also seen as a pre-retirement incumbency. The imprint of their kindness is all around the parish in people who love and respect their clergy and are gentle and devout. The TR before them was assisted by his newly ordained wife Sheila and they did everything discouraging lay ministry. This couple live here and Sheila is a force to be reckoned with: a sparky, bright lady. Many have struggled to work with her because of the strength of her personality and one colleague said she should be kept out. This was likely to cause upset in the parish and crush her spirit which was unnecessary, by keeping in close contact with her and building a relationship of trust which occasionally means saying no I have a good colleague.

Leadership includes senior clergy. The current archdeacon suggested a new way of advertising the parish to capture so of the fun and opportunities of living here. – the opportunities and activities were outlined simply and colourfully. This is a friendly happy place looking to deepen its discipleship, move on and attract new people- a reflection of the town itself open and welcoming to visitors, hardworking people, a little down at heal but willing and generous. The senior clergy work to develop a can-do attitude even our mission statement reflects that: grow in prayer, make new disciples and serve WITH JOY. Unlike a mission statement I saw outside a church which said “To us the task, to others the benefit to God the Glory” which seems far more duty than joyful bound. The AD unlike the one in the tv comedy “Rev” has a palatable way of putting things- when I rang to ask for more information before applying for the post he said “there is some really good news, Shaldon and Ringmore parish are joining the Team”.

God is spoken of easily in all the church services. There is a devoutness and simplicity in people’s faith, they enjoy coming to church - their faces happy and attentive. St Michael’s has incense every week, St James enjoys you making a few jokes before settling into a prayerful space. Shaldon is uncertain about whether to return to their high altar with incense after Covid starting an interesting debate at the Annual Parochial Church Meeting.
It’s not as though the churches are deliberately inward looking because there is a debate which surfaces occasionally about what we look like to people who don’t come to church. Orthodox Christians don’t worry too much about how they look to outsiders they haven’t had a reformation and are not used to introspection in the way the west experiences it. Russia’s Christian heritage came from the Byzantine empire in 998 Prince Vladimir of Kyiv took part in a service at Hagia Sofia, Constantinople and declared:

“We did not know whether we were in heaven or on earth. Such splendour and beauty are not found anywhere on earth: it is impossible to describe. We only know that God was there among the people”.

Both my sons were baptised and Chrismated as Orthodox as my ex-husband was and at the baptism of my second son as we stood at the font singing “for as many as are baptised into Christ put on Christ, alleluia” I had a sensation of being in a thin place between heaven and earth such as I’ve seldom had it was like actually being in an icon. The challenge is to bring a deeply spiritual experience like that into our services. However recently an afternoon baptism at the font by the door consisted of chairs turned in to face the font with another row of pews running at right angles and the priest stood on the door mat with people coming in and out. Pleasant and friendly as we are the church building is not helping to convey the splendour and beauty of God to people who have brought their precious child, whose birth has brought them to wonder. 

There is a flow of energy in a church – the flow of the Holy Spirit but this can be distracted or blocked by a number of things. Untidy, messy churches speak of a lack of care and forethought. The internal ordering can be distracting to the priest and the people. In St James the pulpit blocks the view to the altar for nearly a quarter of the congregation and no one has used it for years, when attempting a baptism there are uneven steps and creeky boards around diverting the priest’s attention from their work.

Baptism needs to be reclaimed as the most important sacrament – outward and visible sign of inward invisible grace - that it is. A glass half-full attitude to people who approach us has the effect of diminishing the feeling that has encouraged parents to trust us with their child. These days there is often quite a bit of folk religion attached to why children are brought to us it is for us to choose to see it as the action of the Holy Spirit. The question is has the rationalisation of religion and Protestantism itself contributed to this?

“Protestantism – the adroit castrator
Of art; the bitter negation
Of song and dance and the heart’s innocent joy —
You have botched our flesh and left us only the soul’s Terrible impotence in a warm world.” (Song at the Year’s Turning by RS Thomas).

The Wesley’s came under the strictness of the Puritan regime of their mother Suzanna Wesley. She had 19 children (though 9 died in infancy) and they lived in such “quietness as if there had not been a child among them” (Greven,p.20). Every kind of misdemeanour was punished. I believe this culture of treating children still hangs on in churches where the idea that “children should be seen and not heard” still drifts in. An emphasis on sin – like the continued desire to keep the prayer of humble access after we have already confessed and been forgiven is fused into church culture, though it is a strictness that God would not own (The hymn There’s a Wideness in God’s Mercy)
One of the difficulties I find with the more Catholic end of the church is when piety seems to turn to sanctimoniousness (my spell checker doesn’t like this word but my mother who went to a RC convent used it often!). One of the things is the blank look in services based on not encouraging a cleric who might get conceited. This seems to exclude outward scenes of happiness in church which also links to not being too positive about what we say, giving instead comfort. People are not exalted to “dream dreams” (Joel and Acts 2.17) One older priest in my parish recently took a funeral for a man she knew well whose widow had expressed asked for her but entirely refused to say that this man’s character had been formed and sustained by his Christian faith. In this respect we’ve had good opportunities by the Queen’s Platinum Jubilee to note that her good character, long service and devotion come from her faith and were grounded in it when she committed to serve by God’s help for all her life however long that was.

The national church’s struggles reflects in the local of course. The question of sexuality and the cruelty that is perceived as coming from a church struggling to accept other forms of identity. We are not being joyful proclaimers of the gospel but apologists in the wrong sense. This effects those inside and outside of the church. An active priest in the parish, Laura is in a same sex relationship she was encouraged by one assistant bishop to go for a post in the Diocese only to find months later that the other had blocked it without telling her. This action left her hurt and angry and planted seeds in a fallout in the parish with the last TR as she struggled to trust authority and feel valued as a priest. In St Michael’s after the suicide of a girl whose church had suggested her same sex attraction was not appropriate the PCC boldly made a statement of support and inclusion. It made it to a church near you but wasn’t put on our website. Recently we put up a sign on the noticeboard to say we are an inclusive church, a retired evangelist priest seeing this rang me and said he wished to work with me and the church because of our willingness to back this. As a result of our boldness he has put us in touch with a group who wanted to start up the only AA group in Teignmouth and a Foodbank sensitive to family needs and local families.

In summary we speak of God by our loving kindness to one another, by being organised as a missionary people and being God’s feet on earth. In the words of St Teresa of Avila the 16th century nun

“Christ has no body now but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which he looks compassion on this world. Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good. Yours are the hands through which he blesses all the world. Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, yours are the eyes, you are his body. Christ has no body now on earth but yours.”

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CAREY SALEH

*My Tongue Shall Be The Pen Of A Ready Writer*
My Tongue Shall Be The Pen Of A Ready Writer

_A brief comparison between the role of priest and the role of writer in finding meaning, and how the search for meaning and creativity has been expressed through written narrative by those seeking to speak of God._

Having read the following words on a literary blog I found myself wanting to linger over them:

"Writing is nothing less than an act of faith, a toiling that would make no sense at all if not for the belief that the work has meaning. It asks us to pay attention to the ordinary, to discover in our own life abundant symbols and patterns. It is a way to insist on meaning... The work requires a constant engagement with difficult truths, many of which are deeply buried."  

I was struck by how these words echoed for me the work of a priest in ministry. Ministry is a toiling that would indeed make no sense unless one believed the work had meaning. A belief a priest holds even amid a prevailing culture that does not always recognise that meaning, and yet a society that expresses some need, however unvoiced, for meaning.

In 2014 a report was produced that focused on revitalising spirituality to address 21st century challenges. It stated:  
"many seem to recognise that the world’s major problems have spiritual elements that are not adequately acknowledged or addressed, partly because we don’t seem to know how to conduct the debate at that fundamental level.”

The report looked at four main features of human existence that explain “why spirituality is our ground:

*Love – the promise of belonging*
*Death – the awareness of being*
*Self – the path of becoming*
*Soul – the sense of beyondness."

This work however was nothing to do with the Church of England, nor any other Christian denomination, nor any other religious or faith group. Indeed, the Church of England was looking in a different direction for its inspiration, that same year

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62 Abigail Nguyen Rosewood in an essay called Trust, Discovery and Dreaming while awake. Lit hub
63Dr Jonathan Rowson _Spiritualise: Revitalising spirituality to address 21st century challenges_. RSA Action and Research Centre, London (2014) p.6
64 Ibid p.8
bringing out its report on leadership as a focus for revitalising the church, and leaving the Royal Society of Arts to explore our human need to find meaning in Spirituality.

The following might indeed have read as an inspiring vision for the Church of England; but it was the Royal Society of Arts who expressed a belief that “The overarching role of spirituality is to serve as a counterweight to the hegemony of instrumental and utilitarian thinking. At an economic level this means intelligently critiquing the fetishisation of economic growth and global competition. At a political level, it means that citizens need to be the subjects of social change, not just its objects, with spiritual perspectives playing a key role in shaping and expressing the roots and values of democratic culture. Within organisations of all kinds, the spiritual deepens our vision of intrinsic motivation, and gives structure and texture to human development and maturation.”

Perhaps this was influenced by life’s experience – that many who find expression through the creative arts do so in order to find meaning, and so their creativity becomes for them akin to a spiritual practice.

Hildegard of Bingen, born towards the end of the 11th century and dying near the end of the 12th, experienced from childhood visions that enabled her to find meaning within the Gospels and Psalms and Wisdom Literature that she longed to share through teaching and writing. Neither teaching nor writing were seen as suitable professions for a woman at that time, certainly not a woman obedient to the church. She resisted that longing, only to become gravely ill. The longing however became so overwhelming that she had to follow it. She then recovered from her illness. A wise spiritual accompanier would perhaps have recognised that illness as a symptom of Hildegard’s own resistance against her calling – her reason for being – to find and express meaning in speaking of God.

In speaking of God there is an encounter of relationship. Rami and Aaron Shapiro express this as “...in engaging with the craft of writing, we are seeking ... encounter: with the human, with the divine, with life, with art, with the other. These encounters occur in words, in the opportunities afforded by ink and paper. The idea, as Jesus said, is to keep seeking, to keep writing, turning sentences around until one of them turns you around in return.”

This turning around is to understand ourselves and our connection. Shapiro continues:

66 From now on in this paper, Royal Society of Arts will be cited as RSA
67 Rami Shapiro and Aaron Shapiro Writing - the sacred Art: Beyond the page to Spiritual Practice: Skylight Paths Publishing, Woodstock, Vermont, 2012), p.xv
“Writing as a spiritual practice leads us beyond the distinction between the one and the many, and toward a realisation of the one as the many. This realisation is the chief characteristic of soul. Soul is the level of consciousness that sees all things as expressions of the One thing, call it God… If mind is the I that sees itself in contradistinction to all others, then soul is the I that sees itself interconnected with all others.”

Anne Lamont who has written on faith, mercy, grace also writes on writing: “good writing is about telling the truth. We are a species who needs and wants to know who we are. Sheep lice do not seem to share this longing which is perhaps why they write so little. But we do. We have so much we want to figure out.”

We write and we pray from within. Jesus said: “When you pray go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”

Stephen King advises the same about writing. “Your writing space needs to be humble and it really needs only one thing: a door which you are willing to shut. You have made a serious commitment to write - you step into your writing space and you close the door. The door closes the rest of the world out; it also serves to close you in and keep you focused.” King goes on to describe the rewards which he sees as life-giving:

“I have written because it fulfilled me. Maybe it paid the mortgage and got the kids through college, but those things were on the side. I write for the joy of the thing. If you can do it for joy, you can do it forever. There have been times when for me the act of writing has been a little act of faith, a spit in the eye of despair….it makes my life a brighter and more pleasant place. Writing is about enriching the lives of those who will read your work, and enriching your own life as well. Writing is … as much the water of life as any other creative art. The water is free. So drink! Drink and be filled.”

Jesus calls anyone who is thirsty to come to the water of life and drink. So perhaps it is not surprising that the RSA – believing in what it calls “The Power to Create” and that all should have equal freedom and opportunity to nurture their creativity – should explore Spirituality as a recognition that humanity longs for depth rather as we long for air and water. Is not spirituality about our thirst for something life-giving that we have not yet found?

68 Rami Shapiro and Aaron Shapiro Writing - the sacred Art: Beyond the page to Spiritual Practice: Skylight Paths Publishing, Woodstock, Vermont, 2012), p.xxi
69 Anne Lamont Bird by Bird: Instructions on Writing and life (Canongate Books Ltd, Edinburgh, 2020), p.29
70 Matthew 6:6 NRSV
As a priest this is how I long to write, whether I am writing a sermon or a prayer meditation or a poem or a short story or working on a longer piece of work such as a novel or play. I believe in the work because I long for connection – a connection that feeds my deeper self, that connects me with another deeper self, that connects me with the divine longing to create and connect with the one who created me.

The inner room where I pray is also the inner room where I write. And I write to find some meaning and give expression to that meaning – however limited our human words are. It is also what helps me understand and appreciate the great gift of literature that is the canon of scripture. How these stories were conceived as an expression of meaning, a way of expressing their understanding of the divine.

A people taken into exile in Babylon framed their experience. They had broken the covenant with their creator who had chosen and called them to be a people set apart for the purpose of reflecting God. How could they now sing the Lord’s song in a strange land? They expressed this in poetry, in lament, in a longing for home; and in exile, far from home, they began to write the narrative of how this all came to be. They were a people who were part of a narrative, one that would have meaning not just for themselves but for all. So the book of Genesis came into being.

Different narrative voices could be heard within the whole. Certainly the early chapters of Genesis are seen as a composite work compiled from different sources and interwoven voices. Scholars have recognised the Yahwist, the Elohist, and the Priestly writer. The reason for writing was to express some sense of meaning, to offer a theological insight, to consider what is our connection with the divine, and how does that affect us and those who will come after us. They sit beside other stories of creation from other traditions. These stories take us into a vaster landscape. “Readers are invited to view a screen that is cosmic in its scope and to engage in an act of the imagination that carries them beyond – far beyond – their little corner of the world, wherever that may be.”

Others continued the story. The history books, the prophetic oracle, the wisdom literature, including “the moral categories of Proverbs”. And not least from an even more ancient text - the dramatic fiction of Job. Israel goes to the theatre, “and like all good theatre it is aimed at self-awareness... In this drama, it is intended that Israel should be transported out beyond itself and every common assumption. It is the work of such drama to hold us for a time suspended from the familiar, perhaps to be changed by the assault of fresh perception.”

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74 Ibid p.412
75 Ibid p. 402
Then a new Storyteller came into being, in the tradition of his elders, faithful to the Scriptures, and yet with a new song, a new melody that still held echoes of the old. He told parables, took moments of life’s experience in the world around him, and wove them into stories. He remembered perhaps watching his mother knead bread or sweep and search the house, observed the work of shepherds and farmers. He saw how those he gathered around him still struggled with suspicion of each other and so he told a story about two sons, and a father who loved them both. He saw the religious leaders in their piety and privilege forgetting the reason for their calling, ignoring those who were hungry and thirsty for God. He saw the hatred of those different to them: and he told a story of a traveller who was set upon by thieves on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho. This Storyteller found meaning in the ordinary things like bread and wine, giving them a divine significance in which ordinary people could partake and find the sacred meaning of relationship even in the face of suffering and death. His narrative was a spiritual practice.

Later, others eager to tell his story also wrote, each one a unique voice: The young man who did not have a great grasp of Greek but wrote with an immediacy and brevity to an early movement; the Jew who wrote of other faiths coming to worship and to listen to the words; the physician who placed stories of men and women side by side, and who even wrote a sequel recording the travels of his missionary friend; and the visionary and poet, who recognised in the Storyteller the mystic and teacher, and so brought the deepest of those teachings together, connecting them with echoes of an older story. “In the beginning was the Word.”

The book that I was asked to review for this course is Seamus Heaney’s 100 Poems. One poem that struck me, and indeed is part of the review, is the first in the collection called Digging. Heaney, holding his pen, looks from his window and sees his father with a spade in hand. He remembers his grandfather “who cut more turf than any other man on Toner’s bog.

The cold smell of potato mould, the squelch and slap
Of soggy peat, the curt cuts of an edge
Through the living roots awaken in my head.
But I’ve no spade to follow men like them.

Between my finger and my thumb
The squat pen rests.
I’ll dig with that.”

Digging for meaning. As a poet.

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76 John 1:1
77 Seamus Heaney Digging from 110 Poems Faber and Faber Ltd, London (2018), p.3
Whatever our tool, the digging deep and journeying deep takes us to a sacred space: an inner room, the interior castle as Teresa of Avila described it. For in that inner room one finds not only one’s own creative voice but the very creator, the divine, who called us to create. For we are each made, uniquely and beautifully, in the image of that creator.

Perhaps our own journey into ourselves and therefore into God is directed by yearning, a need to dig deep. Speaking of God is difficult, almost impossible, to do in a vacuum. Instead, we all express our theology within a narrative of our own life and worldview. For Jesus, theology was always embodied. "The word became flesh and dwelt among us." 78 And the way we tell and embody our stories can then become a theological act. As the poet Ntozake writes, "I found God in myself ... and I loved her fiercely.” 79

It also helps to remember that any theological language, whether written word, artistic creation or prophetic action, is ultimately a metaphor. We borrow language from one experience to enhance expression of another. Speaking of God is always finite, a contradiction in terms. But as Wren points out, the best use of metaphor is not to confine our thoughts about God, but to provide a “capacity to go on generating insights.” 80

The writer creates something that wasn’t there before and which will perhaps act as a bridge to the next part of the journey. Marilynn Robinson testifies that the influence of reading and writing has given her “a sense of what is possible. My cloud of witnesses to the strangeness and brilliance of human experience.” 81

Writing has always been part of my own experience of becoming, a means of exploring self and how that self finds herself in the world, relating and reaching out to something beyond yet intimately a part of myself. Expressed through poetry or reflection, laughter or lament, the experience of living in the world through Christian practice becomes for me an intimate theological encounter. I find a sense of belonging, as Robinson did, in the community of the written word.

I write because the words need to be written, the journey has to be undertaken. As Stephen King said: “If God gives you something you can do, why in God’s name wouldn’t you do it?” 82 King is a case in point. He does not use the name of God

78 John 1: 14
81 When I was a child I read books, Essays (Great Britain: virago press, 2012) p. 22-23
lightly in this sentence; he believes it. Nor does he plan his novels; he believes that "Stories are relics, part of an undiscovered pre-existing world. The writer’s job is to use the [delicate, skilful] tools to get as much of each one out of the ground intact as possible." 83

From my childhood, writing and God were difficult to separate. They existed in the same place; the inner, mysterious, passionate part of me that I journeyed inward to find. In my teens, writing and God were also part of a private indwelling. Amongst extrovert evangelical friends who talked about God all the time – and presented a very different kind of God than the God I believed in – I would grow perturbed, private, protective. I needed to find another language that spoke of the wonder and mystery I had known as a child. So as a woman I wrote of the child who had found, in the depths of the church boiler room, the warm throbbing mother-heart of God. There, below the earth, was nothing to fear; certainly not the fires of hell. Instead, the more awesome and secret discovery that there was nowhere one could go from the presence of that great source of all being. I saw God as the source of the longing in me, including the longing to write. She became my divine creative energy, the word, springing to life. Matthew Fox talks of this divine creative energy as a true translation of the spirit of the Hebrew “Dahbar” which the English Bible translates as “Word.” 84

Fox inserts this into a new reading of the opening of John’s gospel. “In the beginning was Creative Energy”, and continues “Creative Energy became flesh and pitched its tent among us, and we saw its glory as the only child of the Creator, full of grace and truth.” 85

It is this imagery that has enabled me to understand the writer who is me, the me who is the writer, being invited into intimate relationship as a co-creator, an offspring of that divine creative energy, experiencing that longing within my own being - to bring into being. As a woman writer and priest, I begin to see through my writing, my way of prayer and conversation, that my role is to reveal and enable that divine creative energy through the seasons and cycles and rhythms of life but also to write of that mystical, intimate glimpse of the God who is the Source of all being, Eternal Word and Holy spirit; mother, womb, love and laughter.

In conclusion, to reflect Rosewood’s words at the beginning, I believe such work has meaning; and meaning is essential for us to live and work and have our being. As a priest I am called to pay attention to the ordinary and enable others to see the patterns and symbols that make it extraordinary: “This is my body.” 86 So in my

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83 King, on Writing (2000), p.129
84 Matthew Fox Original Blessing (Santa Fe, NM: Bear and Company, 1983), p.36
85 Matthew Fox (1983), p.36
86 The Institution of the Lord’s supper: 1 Corinthians 11
writing. And it is the writer, the storyteller within me, one who puts words together to reveal those patterns and symbols, that enables me to share the narrative that is the basis of my calling to priesthood. The toil is perhaps the daily grind of the ordinary, perhaps the frustrating, that can at times appear to get in the way: but can also in moments of unexpected joy be the catalyst to revealing that which is truly of the Spirit, revealing the Being who called us to be fully human.

If we can lead others to that place then perhaps “leadership” isn’t wasted. But without the call to creativity and to co-create as a spiritual practice, then leadership can feel emptier than it was meant to be.

Carey Saleh

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ANDREW THOMAS

Need & Want: How do we speak of God into the pastorally sensitive encounter?
Need & Want: How do we speak of God into the pastorally sensitive encounter?

When thinking about how I might speak of God in this opportunity I have been given, reflecting on the pastoral encounter and the imperative of being true to oneself, saying what needs to be said, while at the same time balancing it with what one might want to say, I began by spending time thinking and reflecting on parochial ministry, its many facets and how one might speak of God in some of the multitude of different encounters. As the incumbent of six rural and semi-rural parishes in West Devon, a lot of my time is taken up with Occasional Offices and my work with the two church schools. And so in thinking about how we might with, balance and care, speak of God, I’m first drawn to ask the question, what does God sound like?

The voice of God appears in scripture often \(^{87}\) and so maybe, listening to what God’s voice sounds like, might help us to be able to speak of God with honesty and care in the pastorally sensitive situation. However, as one knows, there is more to who God is, than what God sounds like. And so, wondering and pondering on what God looks will also enable us to gather more tools that empower us to speak of God.

In a story that is now rather considered to be mostly urban myth, a school teacher on a wet afternoon told her class to gather pencils and paper and draw a picture of their entire choosing. After about 10 mins of the children beavering away at their endeavours, she got up from her seat at the front of the class and went to see what had been produced. Billy told her with delight that he had drawn his family’s new home, and Sally told the teacher that she was drawing the flowers that her mother had planted in the family garden. Then she came to Sophie, “that looks very interesting Sophie”, said the teacher, “who is it?”. “God” said Sophie rather confidently, “but no one knows what God looks like”, said the teacher, “they will when I’m finished!” came Sophie’s reply. And so I put it to you, that we adults

\(^{87}\) Just some examples – Gen 1.26, 35.3; Lev 20.2; Mt 3.17; Mk 1.11; Lk 3.22; Mt 17.5; Mk 9.7; Lk 9.35; Jn 12.28
might learn valuable lessons in how we speak of God to the world around us and to those we pastorally encounter from the mouths of babes.

There is a distinct lack of naiveté in children, that often speaks in to the truth, whether the adult wants the truth to heard or not. This innocence of youth can been seen in a number of different situations and places, not least in the book of Samuel[88] where we read of the boy Samuel being taught; he is learning to listen to what God might be saying to him in the stillness of the night time, he is being taught the valuable lesson of listening and being quiet. For children and those who are children at heart there is often a seemingly obviousness to what they see and hear, life can be one long ‘emperor’s new clothes’[89] journey, where their lack of social inhibitions doesn’t hold them back from telling it really how it is, whatever the cost, although as adults we sometimes see that this inhibition can have consequences. This child like approach can be rather refreshing and enlightening to those of us with perhaps a more mischievous mind, but it can also bring us up short and bring on a heavy dose of ‘inner cringe’, awkwardness, and even fear.

In a previous career I worked as a children’s nurse in a busy hospital Intensive Care Unit. On one particular occasion I found myself nursing a small boy who was gravely ill and dying. I remember having conversations with his parents about his prognosis and how we might manage ‘the end’. This included how we might introduce the subject and the inevitable events to his elder brother, who was 4 years old. The patient’s parents were very worried about his brother and were very anxious about how they were going to tell him what was happening. After a long conversation of support and encouragement with the parents, the sibling was brought into the department to see his dying brother. He was told what was happening, and that his brother would not be able to speak to him and wouldn’t be able to get out of bed. Into the department he came with his toy cars and after a several minutes of playing with the cars on the bed with his brother, he asked me if his brother was going to die. After telling him, as agreed with his parents, yes, and that he was going to be with God, he in a very matter of fact way said that would be

[88] 1 Samuel 3.1-11
[89] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Emperor%27s_New_Clothes
fine then, “…he would be loved by God. Can I go and play with my Lego now?” One can imagine the mixture of emotions at that moment, the shock, relief, and sadness of the innocence and surety of what was happening and what would happen, it’s perhaps something that we adults could learn from when speaking of God. For Children, Heaven is very often a very real and tangible place with angels and God, and whilst we fluff around our words trying to say what mean without making it as clear as it ought to be, the child has got straight to the point and laid it all out in far simpler terms that we could have.

One of the Ofsted requirements of Religious Education is helping children to develop an increased awareness of their spirituality and the spirituality of faith. This is particularly pertinent in the Church of England voluntary aided and controlled schools, where the SIAMS inspection framework has it as a principal part. When speaking to children in the four primary schools I visit regularly the pupils will often have a developed sense of spirituality, but may not have the linguistic skills, insights, or understanding to explain and illustrate what they mean and understand. When shown, the children learn quickly where they might see God, but sometimes don’t know how they see God. Children hear of God from adults, the world around them, and the media, amongst other places, and once they have seen and heard God, they will have no trouble in telling you and speaking of God, often in profoundly simple and easily understood and communicative ways (ref Sophie’s picture previously).

So why do we adults struggle sometimes to speak of God? What is it that stops us from being more child-like in our faith and spirituality? Christ himself tells us that we need to change and be more child-like, otherwise the Kingdom of Heaven is not going to be available to us. We are called to be more child-like, to speak as a child does, to be open, accepting and vulnerable with God, as a child very often is. And yet we still stumble over the block in our path that we occasionally put in front of ourselves in our attempts.

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90 https://www.smcsqualitymark.org.uk/what-is-smsc/
91 Statutory Inspection of Anglican and Methodist Schools
92 Matthew 18.3
Maybe one of the many reasons we stumble and struggle with speaking of God is that we are fearful that we won’t have the ‘right’ words. And yet Christ tells us that we don’t need to worry about this either. If we truly love God, and therefore truly trust God, God (the Holy Spirit) will give us the words that we need when we need them. I believe to accept this is, in part, to be living your life vocationally. Vocational living is living the life that you need to live, that God has called you to live, which is not always necessarily the life that you want to live. Living your life vocationally is listening to God and following him where he leads you, come what may.

As a curate in training I found myself in a funeral ministry situation that I wouldn’t have ordinarily sought out. As a priest I have always been of the opinion that my preaching during a funeral is about me offering some degree of comfort and hope to a grieving family, and the rest of the congregation get to listen in; I learned this in Pastoral Ministry lessons at theological college, and what I observed in watching my Training Incumbent ‘at work’. Some might say that funerals are great evangelistic opportunities, and I would agree, but I don’t believe that this is my principal aim at that sensitive and potentially fragile time. A few days after the funeral in question, I received a letter of vitriolic complaint from a member of the funeral congregation reprimanding me because in their view I hadn’t taken the ‘golden’ opportunity to tell a packed church that turning their lives to Christ was the only way they would be saved. For a local farming family who were grieving the loss of their father, who whilst faithful didn’t profess any specific beliefs, I believed, and still do, that they didn’t need to be given an opportunity during the Service to think that their father was not saved by Christ, irrespective of whether I thought he had been saved or not. Sometimes when we speak of God, we need to be very careful that we have empathy and not sympathy. We need to put ourselves in to the shoes of those we are caring for or speaking to, and have the emotional intelligence to know what not to say, even if we don’t wholly know what to say.

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93 Matthew 10.19
Pastoral sensitivity and evangelism I would argue are not always easy bedfellows. Maybe one way around this is to take a leaf out of the book of the child, and say what we see, tell it how it is, point out that the emperor is indeed as naked as the day he was born, but is that the pastorally sensitive option? Will that push more people away than it will attract and engage? Is it the way of Christ?

There are occasions where Jesus, seemingly uncharacteristically tells it exactly how it is, and then there are occasions where he seems to ‘pussy foot’ around the subject, being sensitive, and leaving us, arguably, not really knowing what he means. And yet, on reflection, in time, and in the light of Christ and the love of God we are often able to work out what he means. Take the story of the woman caught in the very act of adultery, Jesus doesn’t specifically, clearly, and blatantly, say that all the men standing around him are sinners and hypocrites, nor does he even ask how they went about catching her ‘in the very act’, yet, as we read about them leaving the scene one by one, beginning with the eldest (and presumably wisest) we know that they know what the message is. So when walking the tight rope of pastoral sensitivity and faithful integrity we may want to say one thing, but insight has taught us that we need to say something else; can we combine the two, saying what needs to be said whilst leaving our hearers to work out for themselves what it is that we actually want to say?

Human beings are relational creatures, we become who we are called by God to be very often by our relationships with each other. So when we find ourselves in the bereavement pastoral encounter we need to think very carefully about how we approach the grief that is expressed before us. How we are to speak of God, and show something of the love of God to those experiencing this pain?

Another aspect of the childlike approach that I would like us to think about is that of the learner. We have already seen the boy Samuel learning with the help of the old man Eli what it is to listen to God, to go where he is led, and any of us who have spent any amount of time with children will have experiences to share.

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55 John 8.3-11
57 1 Samuel 3.1-11
where we have seen the speed and agility of the child in the realm of learning. The child seems to soak up new learning faster than it sometimes seems possible; adults can experience this very easily. Try learning a new language in adulthood, and as you struggle with your vocabulary lists, verbs, and subjunctives, reflect back on how much easier it seemed to be when you were a child. Another, are you able to play the piano or another musical instrument? If so when did you learn? I didn’t learn to play music in childhood, however began piano lessons in my 40’s and I freely admit that describing it as a mountain climb doesn’t come close to it. I just can’t get my brain to retain the information. My partner however learned the piano in childhood, still plays, and even after many years of not sitting anywhere near an instrument, plays to a grade 7 standard. When quizzed though, his sight reading skills are not very good, why?, because as a child he learned to play a lot by memory. And this is the point, children don’t often have the emotional intelligence to reflect on why they feel the way they do, or why they do something the way they do it, or even why they have said something to someone, unless it is pointed out to them. They might know that God exists, and they might be able to speak of God, but only after they have been shown how and where, and been given opportunities to experience. Adults on the other hand are perhaps more nervous about what they say, when they say it, and how they say it, especially in the sometimes emotionally charged environment of grief and bereavement, because they can often see the potential consequences laid out ahead of them.

When speaking of God, there are many areas of pastoral ministry that one could discuss. This paper has principally discussed one area of ministry, namely care of the bereaved, where as a practitioner one must be cautious about how we might speak of God. Ministers and those involved in ministry will often want to use opportunities to speak of God, to tell something of his love and light, the Occasional Offices can provide such opportunities. Whilst this is a significant part of clerical life, one must balance though what one wants to say against what one needs to say, and to do so with care, attention, love and emotional intelligence.

Nobody clearly has all the answers, and those of us in parochial ministry, among other walks of ministerial life, know this better than some. Life, and God, is
far more complicated than we perhaps at times give it/him credit for. So maybe the answer is that we do indeed need to be more childlike, we need to point out sometimes that the obvious is right in front of our eyes, but I would also argue that if we are going to do this when we speak of God, we too need to be adult, experienced and insightful about it, and remember that to be Christlike is to be compassionate, and loving⁹⁸.

NICK WATSON

Focal, vocal and local
Focal, vocal and local

It is unfortunate that complex societal structures tend to be undertaken only when the need for them has become acute. It too often follows that reforms which are intended to make a structure more effective and efficient in delivering its core work are compromised by having to deliver a pressing but secondary result of saving money. Examples often cited include the NHS reforms which had been a long-nurtured and developed plan of Jeremy Hunt when in opposition, which were implemented as austerity was enforced with the coalition government. Perhaps even more acutely, the introduction of Universal Credit had a declared aim of streamlining an overly-complex benefits system which had developed piecemeal over decades, so that those in need could be sure of receiving all the benefits to which they were entitled, with less of a costly administrative overhead. In practice, an under-resourced transition coupled with a desire to save money by reducing overall benefits, so that the system has been widely experienced as punitive and inefficient. Costs escalated, deadlines kept being missed and cases of extreme hardship have been highlighted within a wider sense of dissatisfaction among those receiving benefit. In both cases, it is arguable that the stated original aims have not been fully met, without commensurate savings to fulfil the demands of efficiency.

The Church of England might be seen to find itself in a parallel situation. A long decline in active membership (at least as a proportion of the population) and a recognition that structures of diocesan and parochial ministry based on an established-church, ‘Christendom’ model are no longer sufficient has led to a desire for a ‘mixed economy’ of models of mission and ministry, and for a reform of how local ministry is resourced and supported. Unfortunately this desire to reform structures and practices to be more effective is being explored and implemented at a time when the church is increasingly pressed financially and in its ability to deploy stipendiary clergy as was once expected. The primary aim of renewing our mission and ministry to be fitted to our context is having to be delivered alongside planning for sustainable congregational and church life with fewer stipendiary clergy.

Until recently, my experience was that the constraint on the number of parochial posts which could be filled was the number of available clergy, at least in forward planning (we are currently part-way through a ‘bubble’ of retirements, which is reducing the available number of clergy despite high levels of ordinations). My tack in explaining to deanery parishes why we needed to plan for church closures and multi-parish benefices was to explain that under existing staffing levels ‘there aren’t enough vicars to go round, and if there were enough, we couldn’t afford to pay them.’ This situation has changed, in that (at least in my own diocese) the primary constraint is now financial. There isn’t enough money in diocesan coffers to keep paying the clergy we have, let alone to recruit more; so staffing levels at diocesan or deanery level have to be set at a level which is sustainable – which is to say, affordable.

Given these two potentially competing aims in reforming how we resource local churches, where one could be said to be aspirational and one constraining, various strands of restructuring and reform are being attempted, and they in turn can seem to take us in different directions.
‘From Anecdote to Evidence’

In the late 1990s, Durham Diocese and Canon Robert Warren undertook a review of those parish churches which had shown numerical growth over five years. The characteristics which emerged, and which were developed in other studies, led to the Growing Healthy Churches series of books and material. This work was indicative and instructive, but not statistically rigorous in the selection of parishes and other settings studied.

Other strands in mission thinking and resourcing were of course developing. There was an apparent assumption in some of the thinking behind ‘Mission-shaped church’ and related material that geographical communities were becoming less significant, and that the society and so the church of the future would relate more to ‘networks’ than to places. This was not my experience in northern and midlands working-class communities, though it was doubtless true in some parts of society.

In 2010, the Church of England’s Spending Plans Task Group commissioned research on church growth and decline, as a step ‘towards evidence-based decision making in the Church of England’. Research was undertaken over 18 months from 2011-2013, and the findings were reported in an accessible form as ‘From Anecdote to Evidence’ (2014), as well as in more detailed reports available at www.churchgrowthresearch.org.uk. Ten reasons for the research were cited:

1. To find practical evidence to support mission
2. To understand better the identity and context of the Church of England in the 21st Century
3. To bring clarity to issues around church growth
4. To identify what is effective and why
5. To identify what is not effective and why
6. To support and share good practice
7. Because an understanding of how to effectively share the Good News of the Kingdom is important
8. Because church attendance is declining in the Church of England
9. To inform good stewardship and ensure that funds are spent effectively
10. To identify areas where further research is needed

The authors of the public-facing report acknowledge that healthy growth is multi-faceted – growth in numbers without linked growth in depth of discipleship and in outworking of discipleship for the growth of the Kingdom of God is not healthy or a valid aspiration.

The research was carried out by three groups. Two worked on data analysis (with the aim of making better use of the data already collected by the church) and on church profiling, in a more robust version of the ‘Healthy Churches’ work cited above. For the purpose of this paper, I will focus on the third strand, in which,

Different researchers looked at:

a. Growth amongst cathedrals and compared cathedral growth with other city centre or greater churches
b. The impact of church planting/fresh expressions of Church on growth

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99 CHP, 2004
100 From Anecdote to Evidence (CHP 2014) p.5
c. The effect of Team Ministry and Grouped Benefice structures

The evidence gathered on Fresh Expressions of church – contextually-shaped communities of worship and faith recognised by the wider church and often emerging among a particular group – was positive, but at this stage the movement was still quite small. The evidence-base on church planting was even smaller (27 plants, following a range of very different models) but was examined in some depth. The conclusion was that church planting should be an important part of the response and mission planning of the Church of England.

The last strand examined the effects of the prevailing response to reducing numbers of congregations and of clergy – that of the growth of multi-church ministries, whether in teams, in united benefices or multi-parish benefices – solutions the balance of which varies between dioceses, and which rely on varying levels of integration of parochial structure, hence varying levels of independence for each church. Some team ministries do still work with as many incumbent-level priests as there are churches, but this was not the focus of the research, and so the evidence relates to situations where an incumbent is responsible for more than one church, under any governance structure. In 2011 the report states that 71% of the Church of England’s parishes were in multi-parish teams or benefices, (‘amalgamations’ in the language of the report) in comparison to 1960 when the comparable figure was 17%. The exception had already become the norm – and this trend has continued. Broadly speaking, multi-parish benefices used to be a characteristic primarily of rural contexts, but they are now a familiar part of the urban church landscape too.

A key finding of the research is that,

...single church units under one leader are more likely to grow than when churches are grouped together. Analysing data across a range of congregation size categories shows that amalgamations of churches are more likely to decline. Moreover, the larger the number of churches in the amalgamation the more likely they are to decline. This is exacerbated when amalgamations have more churches.

For Team Ministries there is no evidence that there is more numerical growth than for amalgamations. Team ministries are less likely to grow than non-teams and perform markedly worse than churches with their own incumbent.

Another finding was perhaps surprising – between 2006-2011, growth was most likely to take place in churches of over 300 members or in those with fewer than 30 – with decline most marked in churches starting with 50-300 members. The negative growth effects of amalgamation apply across small and medium churches (this tends not to be an issue in larger congregations).

This seems to pose an intractable problem – smaller churches can grow more easily, but cannot be allocated a dedicated stipendiary priest, despite evidence that sharing a leader impedes growth.

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101 Ibid. p.6
102 Ibid. p.28
103 Ibid. p.27
104 There is a risk that correlation may be mistaken for causation here - but that is recognised in the full report.
‘Resourcing the Future’

In 2016, responding to the research and seeking to use the church’s central resources most effectively, General Synod accepted the recommendations of the *Resourcing the Future Task Force*, that inherited ways of distributing central funds were not effective in addressing decline, and that in future all distribution to dioceses should be targeted to support mission and growth.\(^{105}\) Half of the total fund was to be allocated to support ministry in parishes with the highest levels of deprivation (Lower Income Community, or LInC funding). The higher-profile element of the fund was allocated as the Strategic Development Fund, or SDF, giving often substantial grants to support new models of church. While the projects supported since have been very varied, the popular perception is of the funding of new charismatic evangelical churches or the revitalisation of ‘failing’ churches by the introduction of a well-funded team from ‘outside’ and sometimes with limited engagement with local parishes. This is undoubtedly a caricature, but it is a widespread perception among churches (and clergy) who are struggling with their own resources and facing amalgamation with other parishes. My experience is that even those parishes who are heavily supported through LInC funding may not be aware of that fact, and so feel ‘neglected’ in comparison with a nearby SDF-funded plant. LInC funding spreads money quietly, often to support existing patterns of ministry – SDF tends to concentrate funds very visibly in something ‘new’ and with high levels of profile and affirmation form diocesan media and structures.

‘Us’ and ‘Them’

This perception, of reducing resources to traditional church set against generous funding for a select few projects, has contributed to a growing sense among some that not only the resourcing but the very nature of the Church of England – as a geographically-ordered, reformed catholic church for the nation, present in every community for all who turn to it – is being disregarded and is under threat. For some, that was exacerbated by the response of bishops and archbishops to the Covid-19 pandemic. Local churches came to the fore in finding new ways to continue worship and pastoral care during lockdown, and often in taking key missional roles in care to those around them. Meanwhile there was in some places a perception that senior clergy were remote, and that initial restrictions were imposed without reference to local knowledge and priorities.

The most vocal fruit of this frustration was the rise of the ‘Save the Parish’ movement. Its most prominent voices have been associated with churches not themselves likely to face amalgamations or loss of clergy and parsonage; but it has articulated a widespread frustration and sense that the balance is wrong, and that something essential to the Church of England is in danger of being diminished to the point of being lost, eclipsed by the preferential treatment of innovation which may or may not produce ‘results’ of growth which some members of parish churches are not, in any case, convinced are the right results to aim for.

It could, of course, be pointed out that the existing system has had a long time to prove itself, and over the last 70 years or more has not led us to an obvious growth of the Kingdom of God; rather, we have a system which is in danger of collapsing under its own  

\(^{105}\) See ‘Use central funds to subsidise growth, not decline, says task group’ in *Church Times*, 16 January 2015, and ‘Funding decision sharpens debate about the vision’ in *Church Times*, 21 October 2016
weight, and little evidence to suggest that allocating more resources to preserve the system will lead to the kind of turnaround that is needed to make it sustainable.

Another strand – Strategic Transformation Fund

In July 2019, a third strand of strategic funding from the centre was announced, funding efforts to restructure ministry within dioceses. This comes from recognition that short-term investment is needed to resource long-term savings and sustainability.  

Most of this funding has gone to three urban dioceses; Birmingham, Sheffield and Manchester. All three have undertaken major restructuring, and introduced transformation-leading roles (In Birmingham and Manchester, a reduction in the number of deaneries, with full-time Area Deans; in Sheffield, with a new role of Associate Archdeacon Mission Enabler). To varying degrees, these projects are seeking to move the focus of mission and ministry from the individual parish and church to wider units. Broadly speaking, Birmingham is structurally the most conservative, Sheffield the most radical. Crucially all three have undertaken programmes of restructuring which have been criticised locally as ‘top down’, but this has enabled rapid structural change, and the allocation of resources to support the process over a limited period. What remains as yet unproven is how the ‘bottom up’ life and mission of the church will respond by enlivening the structure now in place.

Focal Ministry – squaring the circle?

Returning to the observation that growth is more likely in situations where one leader is responsible for one church, there is a need to provide for local leadership, which will not always be clerical, and for clarity on how that leadership will relate to clergy oversight.

The three dioceses receiving STF funding are working towards this situation, with Sheffield and Manchester using the terminology of ‘Focal leadership’ for their local leaders.

So far as I am aware, this term first began to be used in the early 2000s, when Bishop Graham Dow of Carlisle, chair of the Central Readers’ Council, developed a potential model for Reader ministry based on Biblical exegesis and the needs of Carlisle, a highly rural diocese with many multi-church benefices. His key observation was that such information we have about the ministry of the New Testament church shows a variety of peripatetic ministries (apostle, prophet, etc.) but that the pastoral role was one that was necessarily settled and rooted in a specific community. He advocated that each church community should have a focal leader, ideally resident but at the very least a consistent minister in a given church and known locally within and outside the congregation as the church’s leader. This focal leader would work as part of a team with a stipendiary incumbent who would provide oversight and strategic leadership as well as sacramental ministry, typically across several parishes.

In practice this model, arising from a rural context with large amalgamations the norm, has developed in many places since, but it has not generally been set out as part of a formal structure for ministry.

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106 See ‘‘Focal’. ‘Oversight’. The C of E of the future’ in Church Times 10 September 2021

107 Of which I am one, in Manchester diocese
In 2018 Bob Jackson published *Leading One Church at a Time*\textsuperscript{108}. Responding to the findings of the 2014 church growth research, he calls for a rigorous model of single-church, single-minister leadership, with stipendiary clergy deployed either in strategic oversight across larger areas or freed to concentrate on ‘leading the growth of one or two key churches’.

In my own setting (south Manchester) Jackson’s material has been distributed as a key resource, but the diocesan strategy does not envisage the full independence of churches with focal leaders to the same extent. Instead, the aim is for local churches to work together in Mission communities of 4-10 parishes with a Mission Community Leader (who is also an incumbent in the team) and a team of focal leaders for each church or other worshipping and ministering community (chaplaincies, church plants, fresh expressions, perhaps church schools\textsuperscript{109}) working to a shared vision for outreach and sharing ministry as needed for the health of each church and the best work in mission outwards. Some of those focal leaders will be incumbents, others curates (stipendiary or otherwise), Readers or other authorised lay ministers ‘or any suitable lay person’.

An initial launch of this aspect of the Manchester programme exposed the reality that the role of focal minister was not yet adequately defined, and work is beginning to address this.

**Save the parish? Or save the vicar?**

Returning to the ‘Save the Parish’ movement, it is easy for those who advocate reform of structures to caricature the concerns raised just as much as for others to caricature SDF-funded plants as clones of Holy Trinity Brompton. The movement can be seen to be driven by defensiveness of a golden age of parish ministry, perhaps more imagined than real; as having no proposals for how the existing model of ministry can be made sustainable; as driven by an antipathy to change rather than by a vision of the future.

But the reality is that the movement expresses a real and valid concern that the local life of the parish church might be lost – through closure or through operation as a ‘branch’ of a larger organisation rather than as a church community with its own identity.

Focal leadership of individual churches as part of a wider network seems to offer a possible way forward to safeguard the parish church as a key element of our mission and ministry. This, though, will require the kind of resourcing in the short term from which the three STF-funded dioceses are now benefitting. Apart from structural changes, we will need additional resources to support some clergy into more ‘oversight’ roles, and other clergy and lay leaders into a locally-focused ministry, dedicated to a single community.

The resulting church will not look the same as we have been used to, and the role of the stipendiary clergy in particular will look quite different. But it will be local, parochial (hopefully in the best sense) and rooted in its community.

We may be able to save the parish – but not, at the same time, to save the vicar – if by that we mean to preserve traditional models of ministry across the country.

\textsuperscript{108} Grove leadership series L34

\textsuperscript{109} In some larger or more complex churches, particularly those with congregations serving particular language-based groups, there will be more than one focal leader.
From here to there

I am aware that I have sketched out the situation and not proposed a clear resolution. I hope to discuss with colleagues their perceptions of this change, and insights into how wider oversight can best resource and protect the local church.