

North Western Synod:

## Pioneer Ministry:

### Context:

Location:

- Chorlton is Manchester's alternative, *gentrified* suburb. Think bicycles, beards, craft beers and tattoos. Cafes, live music, liberal, educated, creative arts, vegans and Hipsters!

People:

- The age range my post was set up to concentrate on are 20s to 40s.

The three demographics within Chorlton:

- *Graduates/Post-graduates*, (early 20s to mid-30's) who are in low paid, casual bar/cafe/shop work, living in shared/student houses.
- *Young couples/families*, (late 30's to 40's) with very good incomes, or huge debts, or both. Living in very large renovated Victorian houses.
- *Non-graduate minimum wage workers*, (mid-30's early 40's), living in equally huge houses which were cheaply split into flats in the 1980's, poorly insulated and expensive to heat.

These are the kinds of people who are predominately the age, culture, and lifestyle which is absent from most of our churches.

### What is Church?:

- Our model of church was, 'let's put a building in a town and try and get people to come to it'.
- Fresh Expressions expand this model by thinking of contemporary venues and styles of worship, but is still working predominately on an *attractional* model, that is, 'come to us'.
- The model underpinning this pioneering work is different. My post could be best described as 'let's put a minister in a community and see what happens'. To go out, not invite in.

Church is not a club or a building, but a community of people, inspired by the Gospel, to follow in the ways of Jesus.

### Beginnings:

How I began - intentional being was to:

- Have time and space to form my own opinions of the local community, rather than wholly being shaped by the views of the existing churches.
- Be seen by the community as something different to a local church minister.
- Give maximum time to forming relationships with people who are de/un-churched.
- Transition into this new ministry, to have a period to (as far as possible) to *de-church*.

**In this period, I was 'the other'. I had crossed into 'their' space, and had to do so both respectfully, and be honest about my purpose.**

My strategy to encounter young adults was twofold; to spend time in any local place where people naturally meet, sit, and talk; and to join several existing community groups.

## Strategy and Structure:

*Intentional activity requires a methodology, so I decided to:*

- Visit every local business where I could meet and chat, (this totalled over 50 venues).
- Review each visit by a simple criteria to discern which were potentially suitable; could you linger and chat, age range of customers, friendly staff, relaxed not rushed.
- Visit the suitable venues again to narrow down to a manageable number to avoid spreading my time too thinly.
- Design a weekly timetable to visit the same venues at the same day and time each week, in order to meet the same staff regularly, and possibly regular customers too.
- In addition to time spent in local venues, join local community groups, such as book clubs.

## Early Reflections:

Building relationships takes time, as does building trust. There have been many days where it would be easy to feel I was achieving little, such is the difference in traditional ministry and pioneering work. Hours have been spent in cafes and bars, often with little or no conversation.

The time invested was vital ground work; both in getting to know the community, and the community getting to know me - seeing me around, seeing I'm 'normal'. Slowly, conversations began. Naturally, not forced - then quite quickly progressing from greetings, to small talk, to general conversations, to questions about faith and pastoral encounters.

In an increasingly fast-moving world, I found that to simply have the time to spend with people was a counter-cultural gift to offer any community. In relation to my understanding of ministry, it now feels much truer to our concept of stipend. I am being paid so I don't have to be employed and can minister to the community, rather than being employed to 'run' a church.

*I have discovered the gap between contemporary culture and church culture is far, far greater than we ever imagined; yet, at the same time, bridging the gap with people is significantly easier than we often fear.*

**This is good news!**

## Developing relationships, modelling discipleship:

If beginnings are about integrating into the local culture(s) and communit(ies), and 'being normal', development is to begin enabling people to encounter Christianity by intentionally and more overtly sharing the Gospel and modelling discipleship of Jesus.

The external activities are much the same, a regular routine of cafes, bars, and community groups. However, achieving 'normal' status and a reputation for self-deprecating candour, openness, and respect, has meant that mutual conversations have flourished, as many people have wanted to talk with me about their lives, faith, and beliefs, as well as enquire about mine.

If I were to broadly define these regular encounters in 'churchy' language, I'd say around 40+ people in the community in effect now regard me as 'their minister', though few would articulate our relationship in this way.

Conversations about faith are unplanned but now frequent - and five themes have emerged:

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| <b>Church:</b>     | Generally viewed as a good thing doing good things in the community.  |
| <b>Jesus:</b>      | People are positive about Jesus and interested to hear about life/teachings.  |
| <b>Evangelism:</b> | Overt evangelism is a huge turn off, invitations to events aren't even noticed.   |
| <b>Judgement:</b>  | The Church/Christians are judgemental and wouldn't welcome me.  |
| <b>God:</b>        | It would probably never occur to an atheist or agnostic to attend church. Church is a 'club' only for those who already 'believe' in God. |

If people think 'belief' in God is a condition of joining, we need first to address the problem of 'God'!

## We don't 'do' God:

*What do we mean by 'God'? and What is the 'God' people are rejecting?*

We need to talk about God! That is, have conversations ... not simply tell people what we believe. In listening to others and sharing in mutual exploration we can discover *uncommon ground*.

The common image of God: Supernatural being, created everything, all seeing/knowing/powerful. Sporadically intervenes, but is more often not 'here' but 'out there'.  
God is judge and disciplinarian, forgiving - but only just!  
We will be forgiven/with God after death, dependent on combination of repentance, right beliefs, and good deeds.

Understanding God in this way often results in a faith that is perceived as doctrinal, moralistic, literal, exclusive, and as being more concerned about 'the next life'.

For the vast majority of people I regularly encounter in my ministry, this form of Christianity no longer works. The problem is essentially intellectual. The God people cannot 'believe' in is so easily knocked down by rational thought and life experience. Christianity is therefore viewed as asking people to believe the unbelievable, and faith becomes believing in God in spite of all the reasonable and intelligent reasons not to.

Perhaps not surprisingly however, when I have explored with people the idea that the life of faith is more about **relationship** and **trust** than intellectual assent, a mutual understanding has emerged. People rejecting a concept of God which no longer makes sense to them is not the same as people becoming atheists. Often people are very open to experience a different way to understand God.

**I don't believe in the God they have rejected either!**

The best approach I have found to opening up mutual engagement with such people is to position myself (honestly) as the opposite side of the same coin. That is, I often refer to myself as a '*Christian Agnostic*'; by this I mean two things. I don't believe in the God they have rejected either; and, neither am I *intellectually certain* there is a God, no one can be, or need be. It's a matter of *faith*!

This vulnerability on my part has always led to an admission from others that they are probably Agnostic too. Mutual conversation has then flourished, and opportunities to explore together alternative images of God have followed.

When people feel comfortable to then share what they do believe, themes we might find familiar emerge; fairness, justice, compassion, community, relationships, non-judgmental attitudes, treat the world and others well, not all in life is rational, how do we make this life better than it is ... love! In short, being a decent human being is what people articulate as 'the purpose of life' and is what they see in Jesus - the Jesus who we says shows us what God is like. The God in which we live and move and have our being.

If God is like Jesus, that seems not only to be a God that people could 'believe' in, but is actually the 'God' many already trust and are in relationship with, without naming it as such.

I believe that revealing God afresh is a vital activity for the church if we are to reconnect with people; to encounter together a God who is much more immanent and relational, loving and accepting, open and vulnerable.

**If we want to know what God is like, look to Jesus!**

Not only do we need to look more like Jesus, our image of God does too!

## So what have we discovered so far?:

- People won't just come to us if invited, and out Gospel calling is to 'go out'
  - building relationships comes first and takes time
- People like church and Jesus, but struggle with God
  - modernising buildings & worship may help, but we also need to talk about God together better
  - many people 'like' church but feel they will not be welcome as they don't believe in God
- People are suspicious of evangelism and wary of judgement,
  - being vulnerable is vital - people really respond to time and openness

**How do we show the best of our Reformed Tradition, that our faith is one of open exploration, encompassing a great diversity of belief?**

## But I couldn't do that!:

The most common reaction I receive when exploring my ministry with members of the church is,

***'that sounds great, but I couldn't do that.'***

The reasons then given are twofold,

***'I couldn't go into a pub on my own and talk to strangers'***

- Everyone's different - pubs are not everyone's thing, different ages meet in different places. What are the places in all our communities where we would be comfortable meeting others?

***'I wouldn't know what to say'***

- Neither do I! Well, not before hand. The thing is, meeting new people is not about bringing our agenda to the conversation, nor is it about answering questions. The key is simply mutual conversation.

**We have too much confidence in that which we don't know!**

If someone asked me a question about the church, or Bible, or my faith and I don't know ... just say so! Or, better still, I say something like, 'that's an interesting question. Why do you ask?' It's not a cop-out, it's an invitation for mutual exploration. After all, how often did Jesus answer a question with a question? And what did he say about not needing to know what to say, or bringing stuff with us?

***Just be yourself***

Everything we might need is still there to draw on, because we each carry what is essential to our faith in Christ inside us. It's shaped who we are, and informs who we want to be. So anything else we deliberately bring risks becoming a shield or a barrier to openness. If we bring a 'thing' we're determined to share, we're in danger of not really listening and engaging.

Inspired by Jesus, the human one, through whom we best know what God is like. What if we shared with people what we have experienced and learnt of God through them, instead of thinking we need to bring knowledge we have been taught, or believe, or think we should believe!

**So what if the call of the church to mission and discipleship was simply a call to be more human together?**

## What next: for me and for you?

This ministry has changed me ... significantly - and I definitely feel for the better. My whole view of ministry has changed from programs and plans to people and relationships.

I'm more alien in the church world as a result of this ministry, than I am in the 'real' world, and I believe this is another sign of the success of this project, that I have learned how to bridge the gap in ways and with people who will never come to our doors.

I'm incredibly grateful for the experience and investment the church has gifted to me, and hope to share further what I have discovered as we look to the future of our church.

What else has changed is that I feel like I have made a deep commitment to the community where I now minister. It feels akin to the missionaries of old who set sail for a five year mission and stayed some 30 years or more. The world moves fast, and context and culture are constantly in flux - now more than ever. So the work always feels full of endings and new beginnings.

During lockdown much of my work was paused, and now that it can commence again, the community looks very different. Some venues I ministered in have closed, the vast majority have had a large turnover in staff, and all are far from operating at pre Covid capacity. As such, as things have started to reopen, there has been a strong sense of starting again, that is, the landscape is so changed that in many places and ways I'm back to the early forming of new relationships and trust as I did in my first 12 months in post. This is a mix of frustrating, challenging and exciting.

**Much of my work will not simply restart, it will need to be reimagined.**

**Frustrating** as it inevitably feels like a step backwards.

**Challenging**, in that it will be a challenge to see if new relationship in new places can be achieved.

**Exciting**, as this opportunity will open up new possibilities for connection, learning, and gospel encounters.

So since the Autumn of 2021 I have been regularly visiting four new venues in different parts of Chorlton and begun the slow process of getting to know the staff, building familiarity and trust.

My work feels very different from where it had reached. Not only because of the sense of starting again, but also people seem less social, less inclined to mix, and less relaxed when out. There is also a tangible feeling of low resilience. People are still coping with both the Covid and Post-Covid reality, both wanting a return to 'normal' whilst knowing that is not possible. This is something we have recognised that our church communities are experiencing acutely, but maybe don't stop to recognise the rest of our communities are too.

**So what is happening in our communities, post-covid?**

**Who are the people in need of our support?**

One positive change however, is several people now contact me to meet up for a chat. Before Covid, people relied on seeing me out and about and chatting when need and opportunity arose. Lockdown has meant people have had to proactively seek me out, and it is encouraging that several have done so in recent months - enabling a deepening of several pastoral relationships which may not have happened otherwise.

**'The Church' has become less important, and The Gospel more of the focus.**

## Conclusion

This SCM post asked me to create 'a new language for mission', not only because it seems necessary, but also because it's desirable. The idea of the need for the church to speak a new language to a new age isn't simply rebranding old stuff to be more palatable, it is shaping new stuff to be more relevant. Unless we are willing to do the Gospel differently, it may soon die out on these islands.

Yet I have discovered from encounters with people of my generation that they are neither seeking nor missing a relationship with a hard to believe in supernatural being, but are yearning for connection and community - 'life in all its fullness', filled with what is meaningful and positive, human and Divine.

### *How do we get there?*

There is no short cut. There is no strategy or programme or event. If we are a people 'on the way', it's a lifetime journey - spending time with God and others, travelling to destinations unknown.

I'm in for the long haul, and wouldn't want it any other way.

## Reflection:

Nature of Pioneer Ministry:

Pioneering takes time, intentional listening, patience - and an ability to know when to act and when to wait, because the 'how' is much more important than the 'what'.

Pioneers ...

- ... loiter and listen, and hang around at the edge of church and society
- ... seek to break down barriers by respectfully treading on others ground
- ... are good at hospitality, enjoy food and drink, bringing people together and making friends
- ... live on terms set by those outside the church
- ... seek to create time and space, a thin place
- ... meet the stranger in mutual vulnerability
- ... offer time and openness as a gift to all they meet
- ... nurture relationships in different communities and cultures
- ... befriend people, engage them as guides, are taught by them - and often changed by the m
- ... Listen more than they talk, learn more than they teach and question more than they answer
- ... un-learn church habits, travel light, and speak new languages
- ... Share faith by conversation, not proposition
- ... learn empirically by observation and experience, and learn as they go
- ... are shaped, challenged and transformed by encounters in mission
- ... are contextual theologians developing creative expression
- ... make the path by walking, and leave trails for the church to follow
- ... help to reveal God in people's lives

**What I have discovered is the new language of mission is in fact listening for and reflecting back the God I hear and see in the lives and experiences of others. Nothing needs to be invented. God is already at work.**