

SESSION 6

Politics of the Here and Now – Change-makers in the Local Church

If we are to take justice seriously then this realisation affects, or broadens, what it might mean to 'be church' in the place where we are situated. This session encourages us to reflect on how God wants us to relate to and care for our local community.

Key messages

- a. Every local church represents the Body of Christ in that place and is a political presence
- b. Our formal and informal networks help us to establish that presence but also give us a way to see the underlying needs of our community
- c. We have tools through which we can seek to discern how God wants us to relate to our local community and to act for change.

Preparation

You will need:

- Pens and paper for all members of the group
 - Flipchart paper and pens
 - Some background information about your local area for the first exercise
 - Bibles or copies of the reading (John 8: 2-11)
 - Copies of the Session 6 handout on the Pastoral Cycle
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- As this is the last session of the series, you will also need copies of the evaluation form for members of the group to complete

WELCOME AND PRAYER (5 mins)

Living God, we thank you for Jesus' involvement with the people he lived alongside, and for his encounters with strangers along the roadside. We thank you for his practical caring, which has affected the lives of so many people. We thank you especially for his teaching and preaching which offer to us a way of seeing the world through the lens of God's loving justice. Be with us as we explore Jesus' ideas which turn the values of the world upside down. Be with us as we endeavour to see our neighbourhood afresh: through the eyes of the Risen Christ. Amen

INTRODUCTION

ACTIVITY (5 mins)

Ask people to draw a quick sketch map of what they think is their church's local community (boundaries, landmarks).

Don't worry about accuracy – the aim is to help people to think about their local environment and to get the group to agree, for the purposes of this meeting, what is the "community" you are talking about. Attempt to get some broad agreement amongst the group. For some towns or villages this will be simple; in larger areas or if you are a church with members gathering from a wide area this may prove more complicated. There are no right answers, rather it will help discussions later in this session if assumptions are voiced even if they are not entirely shared amongst the group.

COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS

Do we as a church and as individuals have our ears to the ground? This exercise aims to help people to find out more about where they live.

ACTIVITY (20 mins)

Divide into groups of four or five people. The members of any church are living links with many aspects of the local community. Do a quick survey:

- Draw group of stick figures in the middle of a sheet of flip chart paper. These people symbolise your Church, a significant political presence in the area.
- On the left of your diagram add a list of all the groups, organisations, influential people etc which in some way link with the lives of this part of the Body of Christ. So you might

- include local schools, health centres, businesses, local councillors with whom people in your congregation have connections.
- On the right hand side, list any informal networks which are less structured: places where people might stop to converse with each other and influence each other's opinions. For example you might include parent and toddler groups, book clubs, pubs, friends of libraries etc.
- Then compare these groups, organisations and networks with the information about your local area available from official sources of information. In smaller groups write a list of what you may have discovered: Was there a close match between your informal diagram and the official sources of information from your research? What surprises you? What concerns you?

NB Arrange in advance for your study group to have access to some of this information for your local area. (It is possible that someone in your church has already researched demographic material; for example, in order to produce a church profile in preparation for the Calling of a new minister. Otherwise, your local library could assist you.) Visit websites such as the following to find out more.

<http://www.statistics.gov.uk/census/default.asp>

<http://www.direct.gov.uk/en/D11/Directories/Localcouncils/index.htm>

BIBLE STUDY (15 mins)

Read John 8: 2-11

- Firstly, discuss what you see in this account. Who holds power in this story? How does Jesus set about altering the balance of power?
- You can find the crowd's justification for this judgemental act clearly written in Leviticus 20:10 and in Deuteronomy 22:22-24. (Does it seem strange that our New Testament story only mentions the potential fate of the woman, when the original Hebrew Scriptures clearly apply equally to both the man and the woman, once found guilty?)
- Discuss together how Jesus responds to this sudden crisis. Jesus appears to ride rough-shod over the accepted rules of the contemporary Jewish religious authority. Does this strike your group as a courageous thing to do? Why do you think that Jesus appears to hold love and justice in higher regard than the 'letter of the Law' which is enshrined in the early books of the Bible?

Divide into groups again, and return to the list(s) of 'formal' and 'informal' contacts with the local community. Take a few moments to explore whether there are any situations in your own community where it might be necessary to dig below the surface in order to discover, not only symptoms, but also causes of some aspect of poverty or injustice? Examples might include: the head teacher in a prosperous London suburb once said to some prospective parents, "You'd be surprised to discover what goes on behind the net curtains around here!" Do you think that there might be hidden problems in your area? Sometimes small local businesses close, leaving empty shops along a main street. Could there be a reason behind the closures which might be explored?

You are invited to attempt to lay the Gospel story alongside your thoughts about your local community.

TOOLS FOR LOCAL CHURCHES (30 mins)

Following are two theological tools, or resources, to help you explore how we, as Christians, should begin to engage with our local community. The **Pastoral Cycle** offers a process by which churches can begin to discern the will of God for their action in the community. **Liberation Theology** offers lessons developed largely in Latin America for churches seeking to understand what it means to work alongside those who are most disadvantaged.

Depending on the nature of your group you may choose to focus on just one tool, or to look at both and prompt a discussion.

1. The Pastoral Cycle:

ACTIVITY

Ask the group to identify people or situations where you could work together with other partners to try to achieve change. This activity may give you the first glimmer of a possible new vision of service but, if your group is not yet ready to talk of local examples, here is a list of some issues from other communities.

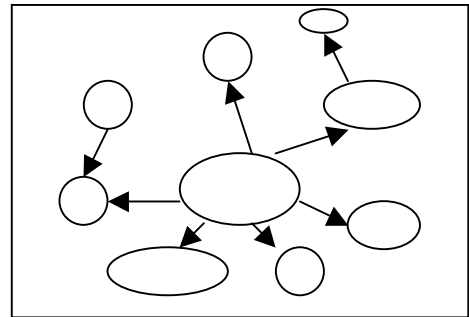
There's an empty shop on the high street which might provide a meeting place for local people.

You are babysitting for a young couple a few doors away, and realise that there is no food in the fridge. The children tell you that they have shared a portion of chips for their tea. When their mother comes home, you make a comment about how expensive life is, and she bursts into tears.

An immigrant worker longs to read English books, and have access to a computer, but his working hours do not match with the opening times of the local library.

The last areas of open land on a housing estate are rapidly being in-filled with new homes, and the local children are losing their only open spaces for play.

- Ask group members to draw a "spidergram" (see right for an example) about the situation – showing everything they know, and all the questions it provokes, and the links with other situations, people and partners. This is the basis for beginning the first part of the Pastoral Cycle – seeing or understanding.
- Give each member of the group a copy of the Handout, and ask them to work through the cycle for the situation they have identified, looking at the questions posed.



The Pastoral Cycle is an ongoing process which helps us to work for change through a cycle of:

- **Seeing** or Experiencing – knowing your community, finding out more about the people and the situation
- **Reflecting** or Exploring– what might God be saying in this situation?
- **Acting** – how can you respond?
- Then the cycle begins again with finding out more about the consequences of acting or the reality of the changed situation

Remember, the Pastoral Cycle cannot be "completed" within one evening. The purpose of this activity is to give members of the group the tools to look at their own involvement in the community. After some discussion along the lines of the handout, invite them to go out from this place and to live the ongoing stages of the cycle. If they have been genuinely challenged, through this process of considering their own community and locality in the light of this story, then is there a particular problem or social need which might be approached in this way? Is the time right for local Christians to become involved in a situation in which they might previously have assumed that someone else would act?

Sometimes you might find that you are the very person who needs to act in a serious situation, just as Jesus was when the woman's life was in immediate danger. More often, however, our task will be to support other people with companionship and skills. This might be enabling access to computers, or information about Local Councillors, for example. Hopefully the church can achieve change together with other people, and with other partner organisations.

The Pastoral Cycle is continuous, until a goal is achieved. If a process is ongoing, we need to remember to keep returning to the Scriptures which give us the model of how Jesus thought and acted, in order to change the world. We are called to continue praying, experiencing and exploring, whilst we are involved with people's difficulties.

2. LIBERATION THEOLOGY

ACTIVITY

Ask the group to think again about the woman whom Jesus had saved from death by stoning. For liberation theologians, the authentic proof of God's grace is love in action – setting someone else free.

Ask the group to think about what the challenges of liberation theology might mean for churches and Christians today – list the four headings/challenges below on a flipchart as a conversation starter.

- **We are called to 'be there' for people, as Jesus was.** Remember that Jesus firstly listened to the evidence from the crowd, and assessed the needs of the woman. There is never a case for assuming that we know what other people need or, especially, how they are feeling. Before we can assist anyone, we need to have clearly heard their dilemma and/ or pain.
- **Getting involved can be scary.** If we are timid, we need to ask God for the courage to speak and act, and to keep on returning to the cycle of prayer and reflection, our access to the Wisdom of God. Remember that you are never on your own, and the whole church is called to action, not just yourself.
- **Taking over can be tempting.** Some others of us are blessed with worldly competence, gained from education and life experience. It would be all too easy for a capable, articulate, skilled person to wade in and sort out another person's life, or to take over and run a community project. We are called to walk alongside people and to offer help when it is useful, and to empower others to act for themselves, wherever possible. Church Action on Poverty talks, for example, of "giving a voice to people experiencing poverty", not speaking on their behalf.
- **Liberation isn't about doing things for or to people.** Only by humbling ourselves before the presence of Jesus Christ in the faces of the poor and powerless, will we avoid being overbearing. Paulo Freire, the Brazilian Christian educator said that, "Even benign paternalism is anti-dialogical". He was saying that it is very easy to destroy authentic conversation, which is essential to liberation. The church community is blessed with significant resources to befriend vulnerable people in a community, and to speak out for disempowered groups. We are called to respect the humanity of the weakest, least attractive person in society, remembering that we are all equal in God's sight, and that any talents and gifts with which we may be blessed with, are at the disposal of God's Kingdom.

A group of (South American) peasants from a (local) community were going to the municipal authorities, accompanied by their priest, in pursuit of basic rights which were being denied them. When they had finished putting their case, the mayor turned to the priest. "And what does the church think?" he asked. "You have just heard what the church thinks".

(Margaret Hebblethwaite, Base Communities: an Introduction (1993) p. 28)

- **Ask the group to reflect on this quote.**
- **What questions or challenges does it raise for your local church as it currently is?**
- **What do members of the group understand by the word "liberation"? How might it apply in your community?**

FOR DISCUSSION (10 mins)

- **What might God be saying to you about the needs of the people who live and work around you?**
- **How can your church be involved in bringing about change?**
- **Who could your church work with, in order to set another person free?**
- **What have you learned from this session?**
- **Are there issues on which you have gained new insights or perspectives?**

Please ask the group to spend 2 minutes filling in the feedback questionnaire on these sessions, and collect them back in to send to the authors of the material.

PRAYER AND CLOSING (5 mins)

You might like to write the people and groups listed below (or other locally relevant ones) on pieces of card and distribute them to members of the group, together with a night-light. These can be placed around a cross on a safe surface during the prayer.

Living, Caring God, we know that Jesus was never afraid to help people, and we ask that you will show us how we should engage in the needs and growth of our local community, both as individuals, and as a church congregation. Help us to listen intently to the various voices around us, and help us to recognise opportunities for action and for care. Keep us alert for creative possibilities for partnerships, which might bring about change for the good.

As we pray, we ask your blessing on those who are engaged in the well-being of our locality: We remember our Local Councillors, our educational services: nurseries, schools and colleges; primary health care trusts and hospitals; residential care facilities; the emergency services; and the many businesses which provide employment and services.

Give us eyes to recognise injustice, hearts to care, and courage to speak about these matters of political action within our local congregations, and with people in positions of power and influence. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen

HOMEWORK

If the group has been inspired and enthused by the discussion in these sessions, encourage them to consider how they could take action for change.