

The Wrong Kind of Snow!

Recently, I was delighted to wake up one morning to find a blanket of snow on the ground. Through the window, the street looked beautiful and it was very quiet too - the snow had muffled the traffic sounds from the lane. We made plans to build a snowman when we got home, then we set off for work and school as normal.

In the evening, we became busy, so no snowman was built. The following day, it rained a little but the snow remained, and after school, there was time to build. It was bitterly cold outside, but we were disappointed to find that, because of the rain, the snow's consistency had changed and we could no longer bind it together. It looked like snow and felt like snow, but, sadly, it was not the right kind of snow for us to build a snowman. We went back inside to get warm, and I realised the snow looked much less inviting now that we knew it couldn't be moulded into the shape we wanted.

In David Blackburn's lead article in last month's 'Crosstalk', he outlined the faith demographics of our Burnage community and asked the question, "Whom is it that God wants us to reach out to?" Based on his article, the most straightforward answer might be, "To the 50% of people in Burnage who are sympathetic to Christianity (or who are actual believers) but who do not feel the need to come together regularly to worship God and Jesus, or at least do not readily relate to the way we perform worship on a Sunday."

In my experience, reaching out to someone, especially if you don't know them well, is a reasonably nerve-wracking experience for both parties! Many people are quite private about their lives and beliefs, and it can take some time to build trust. As a church, we have been doing this work through our "Messy Church" services. Families and individuals attend knowing what to expect: a Bible story; an explanation of the theme; one or two songs; prayers, crafts for children and church to attend these services, to join in an act of worship with people who may be some of the "50%", and reach out to simply by welcoming, talking to and just being with, the people whom we seek to serve. It is not just the people of Burnage who might be apprehensive about coming into our church, but it is also our own reserve which can hold us back from relaxing in the company of strangers.

There is a continuing conversation about how to shape our worship services to meet the needs of the people who attend church now, and an alternate discussion about how to create services which will draw people into church. When we hold meetings in our home, we tidy up, buy some milk and set out cups, etc. on the table. We put out enough chairs, and I sit in each one, just to check the chair is comfortable, and the angle is good enough for the person to feel included in the group. People receive an agenda, which is normally a bit long, and a cup of tea /coffee.

"Why is this relevant?", I hear you ask. I believe people unused to church services respond positively to genuine acts of thoughtfulness and inclusion in worship. When we invite the community into our church for services, we are looking to build on the shared knowledge between us. Hymns that are well known, or easy to learn; the words of responsive prayers displayed on the overhead projector for everyone to follow; the worship leader explaining the theme, and how the service will proceed; providing an opportunity for prayer. Creating a sense of ease and peace may encourage people to return, when they realise there is nothing to fear. Then, we are not moulding the unchurched into our ways of thinking, but unmoulding ourselves into God's way of thinking, so that He can creatively use us to serve the "50%" in our care.

Isaiah 64 v 8 reads, “Yet You, Lord are our Father, we are the clay, You are the potter, we are the work of Your hands”. When we reflect on the work of Jesus, his ministry was characterised by welcome, fellowship, friendship and conversation, a willingness to walk alongside people, an ability to recognise and respond to need. Jesus was renowned for being non-judgemental and for accepting people for who they were. These are all attributes which we have within our church. Now is the time for us to use them.

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