

So, What's Next

September 17, 2020

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Looking backwards before moving forwards

As we face the future with uncertainty, unsure of the how, when and what of the next few chapters in the life of Clare Baptist Church, we are reminded that we must first focus on the why. We might want to ask ourselves the question, "What on earth are we here for?" (with due deference to Rick Warren for providing this question in the title of his book).

Drawing from Scripture, there are a number of verses that spring out, having been constantly springing to mind over the past few years. At the heart of our ministry is Micah 6:8 "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."

Much of our activities over the past few years have certainly ticked off the first two items; our refugee support trips to Dunkirk in partnership with ADRA, our work with Reach in Haverhill (and to a lesser extent Storehouse in Sudbury), our support of House of Joshua in the Philippines to name but a few. We trust that in doing these activities and supporting these organisations we are also in step with God as they bring good news and hope to people's lives.

Another key Bible passage is Matthew 22:37-40 "Jesus replied: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: "Love your neighbour as yourself." All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."

Again, the reminder is to focus on God and those around us with as much love as we can muster. This love is the *agape* love that is unconditional; the sort of love that gives irrespective of the cost to us. We know that we have limits, but we can also demonstrate by our actions and activities how far we will go to share that love around the community and beyond. Pastoral support, both under the auspices of the Pastoral Care Team and the unstinting work that is borne out of relationships, gives testament to love. So does the number of times that the church opens its doors to feed people, in the Men's and Ladies' Breakfasts and Café Church. And, to misquote Jesus, "no greater love hath this church than to run Friday Clubs for years on end".

But, before we get too self-congratulatory about these things, a warning note. Yes, we've enjoyed the hospitality that comes from a cooked breakfast, but when you look around the room we largely see the same faces each time, and we'll probably see them again on the following day in church. Seeing as these events are run by the Outreach Group in the church, it begs the question how far we are reaching out.

Café Church is a slightly different beast, as the numbers who attend are made up of a mixture of those who attend church services regularly and those who don't. However, these ladies are often seen at Ladies' Fellowship, sales, and other church events. Though there is nothing wrong with meeting regularly with the same people, there are a lot of people beyond the church doors who we are not meeting.

What changes could be made to widen the opportunities for people to enjoy the gift of hospitality?

And then we come to Friday Clubs. For many adults who grew up locally, Friday Clubs at Clare Baptist

Church are still regarded fondly as part of their rites of passage through their childhood and teenage years. In recent years though, we've seen a diminishing in the numbers attending, in spite of the increase in activities on offer. Senior Club has had its well-documented disciplinary problems. The leaders have felt under siege at times and holding the attention of the group has sometimes proved impossible. Cooking and competitions are the only activities that get a positive reaction; sadly, the Bible stories that were once told have fallen by the wayside. The attempt to link our activities to the stories, to help ground them and make them memorable, have proved unsuccessful.

We no longer have a Junior Club; it was decided to place it on hold at a time when there would have been only one child attending. Senior and Youth Clubs have, by and large, shut themselves down. As children have finished Primary School and said farewell to Senior Club, we have noticed that they are not progressing to Youth Club. When asked, parents have said that their children find the finish time (9:30pm) too late after a full week at Secondary School.

But, while we are feeling depressed about potentially losing a long-standing event in the church calendar, we should recognise the positive responses that have been earned by the "Open The Book" Team since it launched in 2019. It took a while to get going, but the staff and children of both Clare and Cavendish Primary Schools are so appreciative of the Team's efforts. The result of this is that half the Primary School children in Clare and the whole of Cavendish Primary School are hearing stories from the Bible every two or three weeks (or they would be, if the world was as it was back in February).

During the pandemic we have also had to stop meeting with families who are on the journey through adoption and fostering in partnership with Home for Good. This is a real shame, as the group was developing well and families were finding a good place to come and share in stories and lessons learned, all while their children could play safely and eat many snacks.

What is God asking of us about our work among children and families?

Some events have been put on hold during this pandemic, and it is not known if they will restart due to reasons other than COVID-19. Allsorts has for decades faithfully provided a place for parents, babies and toddlers to meet up. Much loved by all who attend, and with a team of volunteers who have been more than just a friendly face, Allsorts has attracted families from much further afield than Clare. It is much missed during the long summer holidays, so much so that "Allsorts families" have continued to meet in the Country Park for picnics. However, were it to restart once government and BU guidance permits, it would probably be with a different team.

Likewise, TGWNN (The Group With No Name), which provided a space for men to come together with any children they wished to bring with them, to play games, chat and drink copious quantities of tea and coffee. Though it has provided a good outlet for some of the men in church to get together, it hasn't really fulfilled its intended goal of attracting the dads from Friday Club.

All these activities for families have given the church a large number of resources. We have a well-stocked Friday Club cupboard full of craft activities and toddler toys. The Lighthouse Gang room has an air hockey table, pool table and table football table, along with numerous games and activities. The cupboards in the church hall have table tennis tables and more toddler toys.

What is God asking us to do with these resources? How should we use them, or should we let them go?

There are some activities in the church that have already restarted or didn't really stop during the pandemic. Pastoral care within the church family has continued, with every member reminded that they can play a vital role just by being willing to listen to the response to the question "How are you?" This may be over-simplifying it for some, but from this basis, all pastoral care and support springs. There is another

responsibility though for everyone – being willing to answer that same question honestly when asked.

Pastoral care and support have, in some cases, broadened our horizons as people have engaged with local community response groups. The group in Clare has members of Clare Baptist Church on its lists as both volunteers offering support and recipients of that same support. The same is true in other villages and towns, showing that the church's heart is both to serve and be served. I hope it shows that we're not so arrogant to think that we can go it alone. So much can be offered even when shielding by picking up the phone and giving time to talk to someone.

What is God asking of us as good neighbours within our communities?

Church services moved to Zoom from the early days of lockdown in March. Though not an ideal platform, it has continued to provide a space for the church family to connect with each other on a Sunday morning, gathering together for prayer, singing, hearing the Bible and a reflection to take into the week. Supplementing this has been a new written reflection, distributed twice a week either by hand or via email under the titles "Thought for the Week" and "Midweek Musings". Like the Zoom services, these have evolved over the months. Though I continue to write the majority of the Sunday "Thought", more people are having their say in the Wednesday "Musing", which is great to read.

House Groups leaders have responded to the crisis in a variety of ways. Some groups have continued to meet but have moved to using Zoom, which has shown to be advantageous for young families as both parents can be in attendance. Other groups have maintained contact over the phone, offering encouragement alongside pastoral support. Other groups, such as the Ladies Bible Study, have started to meet up again in church.

How do we grow in our discipleship during and beyond the Sunday service?

The church building has not lain dormant through the pandemic. At times it has resembled a combined market stall and charity shop, as we became a distribution point for food for people in crisis (working in partnership with Storehouse and Reach) and for books and jigsaw puzzles for the shielding and bored (in partnership with the Clare COVID-19 Response Group). We also opened the church for private prayer earlier in the summer, which proved vital for the few who regularly found sanctuary within our doors.

But we are now opening up further. Ladies Fellowship and the Ladies Bible Study groups have restarted in church, as have Lighthouse Gang and the Youth Bible Study group. Each of these have complied with the government and BU guidance and have been successful considering the limitations imposed on them.

Likewise, we are in the midst of the pilot phase of reopening the church for Sunday services. Though Zoom has been useful, there is nothing quite like gathering together in one place. However, we are mindful of the continuing threat of the virus, along with the restrictions still in place regarding what we can (and more importantly cannot) do, so we shall see what develops.

What is God saying to us about our building?

A Biblical Perspective

Since May, we have been following the story of the birth of the church through Luke's account in Acts. There is a strong temptation to look at the church as described in Acts 2:42-47 as the goal for us: to be a church that is devoted to one another, being willing to eat together, learn together and share in the fullness of life together in community. An ideal, but one that doesn't reflect our reality today, nor our most recent past. Though we may wish to strive for this model of church, I think that we need to read on

further.

Over the past few weeks, we have been focussing on the church under persecution and the spread of the Good News amongst the non-Jewish people beyond Jerusalem. Below are some headings that summarise what I believe God is challenging us through these chapters in Acts. In some ways, they mirror what has been spoken of during the Sunday Zoom services and written in the corresponding “Thought for the Week”. In other ways, they are more specific for our consideration of the future of Clare Baptist Church.

Acts 8: The church lost control

What is God asking us to let go of?

Acts 9: Barnabas and Ananias took a risk on Saul

What risks is God asking us to take?

Acts 10: Peter and Cornelius crossed boundaries

What new areas is God asking us to go into?

Acts 11: The Good News is for all to hear

What is the Good News for today and for tomorrow?

So, what next? (Part 1)

What follows are some suggested areas of ministry that are offered for consideration. Each of the five activities are run by national (even international) organisations. There is an organic flow from initial contact through discipleship that I will attempt to draw out as we go through each step. These are just suggestions, though. There are many other areas of ministry and mission out there, or we may feel that we need to go in a totally different direction.

Firstly, some information about each activity:

Messy Church (<https://www.messychurch.org.uk/>)

Parents and children attend to engage with Bible stories in fun and creative ways, with food and drinks provided. This has been tried, with some success, at the Parish Church in Clare and has been spoken of as an alternative for Friday Clubs and TGWNN.

Make Lunch (<https://www.tlg.org.uk/your-church/make-lunch>)

Providing food for families, primarily during school holidays and for those on Free School Meals. A loving response to the growing problem of “holiday hunger”, building community and offering opportunities for food education.

Renew Wellbeing (<https://www.renewwellbeing.org.uk/>)

“Quiet shared spaces where it’s OK not to be OK”, offering the chance for people to get together, or spend time alone, in a safe place. Prayer is offered in a separate space and most places work best where there is cake on offer.

Neighbourhood Chaplains (<http://www.countiesuk.org/neighbourhood-chaplains>)

People from the church offering support to neighbours in their local community. The sort of help offered is not limited but could be as vital as regular phone calls and prayer support. Groups can be set up wherever there is a core number in a town or village.

Alpha (<https://www.alpha.org/>)

Having run an Alpha Course in church last year, it continues to prove itself as the most engaging way to find out about the Christian faith. And of course, there's food.

So, what next? (Part 2)

Another way of answering this question is to look at the progression of people who connect with the church in its mission and ministry. If we take a few examples, we can track their path through the church's activities as described above, as well as using existing activities. Each of these is intended to show an idealised "best case scenario", which may differ widely in reality, but we've got to start somewhere...

Example 1: The Jones Family

The Jones Family (mum, dad, Alice (9) and Alex (7) - don't ask!) are invited to join in with Messy Church, having heard good reports about Open The Book from Alice and Alex who love the dressing up. They like what they see and want to find out more. An Alpha Course is a good idea, but they also want to get involved. As well as helping with the refreshments at Messy Church, they start to work with their local Neighbourhood Chaplain supporting their neighbours.

Example 2: Enid

Enid is a delight to all who meet her, unless you start talking about her running rivalry with Betty and her scones. Enid has come along to Ladies Fellowship and loves the varied speakers. She's still active, but doesn't want to commit too often. She becomes a vital member of the Make Lunch team and is considering joining the Ladies Bible Study, as long as it isn't "too heavy".

Example 3: Fred

Fred is desperately sad since his wife of 53 years died last year. As well as attending CLASP lunches on Wednesdays, he wanders into the Renew space in church. Here he finds a safe place to grieve and speak of his anger of being abandoned by his beloved wife. He loves receiving calls from his local Neighbourhood Chaplain and is considering joining in with an Alpha Course.

Example 4: Sally and Emily

Sally is a single parent and Emily is a delightful bundle of energy aged 2. Sally is also frazzled, frustrated and feels trapped with a small child that has robbed her of her freedom and finance. The Renew space would be lovely for her if only she could get 2 minutes' peace and quiet. However, the Make Lunch team have embraced her, taking Emily under their wing to enable Sally to rekindle her love of baking.

Example 5: The Wilson family (mum, dad and Stefan (8, adopted))

The Wilsons have come through the Home for Good group, liking the easy friendship and support that

they find. They are aware that Stefan needs a stable base, so are willing to give the church a go. They enjoy the Sunday services, but Stefan isn't "crafty", so they haven't tried Messy Church. As they are already committed Christians, they are looking for a House Group to join and have asked about leading a group in the upcoming Alpha Course.

These examples are deliberately written to show how all our ministries and activities could weave and twine together. Each activity could retain its own identity and would certainly need a team to run. However, each team would be made up of people with a variety of skills and abilities, all of which can be found within our church. We have committed prayers, bakers, crafters, listeners, etc, all of whom would find a space within these activities.

The listed activities can be based anywhere (within reason). Though it makes sense to use the building that we have for some of these activities, there are others that are entirely portable or don't even need a specific venue. They also aren't exclusively our activities; any or all of them could be run ecumenically if we so wished. Neighbourhood Chaplains, for example, could be run in each town and village that our church members live, with support from other churches in those communities.

It needs to be reiterated that what I have put above are only suggestions. Together we will discern what God has for us and how we fit in with his plans, not vice versa. We need to know what is right by him, or at least be willing to attempt something that we might need to be brave enough to say we got wrong.

We are left with two final questions:

- What is God asking of us as we move forward together with him?
- What is God asking you to get involved with?

Postscript: a word on worship

The word worship is derived from the term "worth-ship", where we demonstrate how much we give worth to, in this instance, God. Over the years, we have understood worship in terms of Sunday services and singing. We even have "Worship Groups" and "Worship Leaders". Though there is nothing intrinsically wrong with this, we need to be aware that this limits the definition and scope of the word. If we deem God worthy of more than just our singing, what do we include as part of our "worship"? How much of our lives as Christians, and our activities as members of Clare Baptist Church, are "worship"?
