THE COMMUNITY OF THE CROSS

Even though it was nearly 40 years ago, I still remember vividly my first week in full time ministry. A number of thoughts were resonating in my imagination. The first was, “most of what I have learnt over the last four years is no help to me in this context.” The second was, “where can I find some help to equip me for this situation?”

The context was inner city Birmingham, a location of significant urban deprivation. The time was the early 1970’s and the church was in a housing area that had been recently redeveloped as a part of a slum clearance programme that had begun in the 1950’s, moving the original population (and genuine community) to a myriad of other locations in the city, usually involuntarily.

The very patchy redevelopment, conducted over a twenty year period, did not think of community so much as numbers of people that could be accommodated in high density housing units (mostly but not exclusively high rise). The very basic elements of schools and a few local shops were on offer but that, combined with some wind swept, empty and rather bleak “green” areas, was it. The dominant thinking was that if you provide people with good quality housing they would respond well and naturally build community. There was very little thought given to the nature of community and how it might actually function.

My wife and I moved into the neighbourhood with two small children in tow. As part of that experience we encountered first hand the sense of helplessness or powerlessness that pervaded the community. Some of the frustration was visited on us by our neighbours. Our milk (left on the doorstep by our local milkman) was often stolen and you could never be certain that the petrol in your car would still be there when you came to drive off in the morning. We were not being singled out for special treatment. This was a normal part of the locality’s terms of trade.

The city authorities who owned all the local housing stock, every social amenity, and even the green open spaces, were not gifted in the creation of social capital. Our family lived in a housing block which comprised four maisonettes (as they were so charmingly called). It had a common entrance way and communal door. On one occasion when local vandals smashed the communal door and left it hanging rather morosely on its hinges, I thought I would demonstrate some responsibility as a local resident and reported the damage to the City housing authority.

Imagine my surprise when I was given a sharp dressing down for having the audacity to interfere with something that was apparently none of my business. The City owned the block, it was their door, and they would find out themselves if it was damaged and repair it in their own good time. They didn’t need interfering busy bodies like me who had the privilege of living there, to waste their time with information like that.

I began to see why the whole neighbourhood was so depressed. The City had taken responsibility for the environment in which people lived, even the grass was owned by the City, but they simply could not deliver on the responsibilities they had assumed. In the process the city authorities had reinforced the sense of powerlessness already experienced by so many of the poor living in their grip.

Community was in short supply and it was not easy to see where it might come from. The mixture of people moving into the area were either working class English, those of Irish descent, West Indians and the occasional African and Asian from the Indian sub-continent.

The churches were probably the closest thing to community that existed in the area. The Roman Catholic church was reasonably strong because of the Irish connection but the Anglican church was very weak and despite the local Church of England primary school, had difficulty filling 20 seats out of the 300 on offer. This did not look like community so much as grim survival.

The Salvation Army sought to meet the needs of the very deprived and the handful of non-conformist churches kept their doors open because those who had once lived in the neighbourhood and had attended the church when it was part of a functioning community, continued to commute back to those same churches as senior citizens. This loyal band fondly recalled how life had been in the 1930's when the Sunday School was full and social life was lived in the orbit of a full church calendar.

The West Indians residents who had a church going tradition tended to commute out of the community to Pentecostal churches in other areas where Kingston, Jamaica could be recreated Sunday by Sunday. They often took the same buses out of the community that had brought the commuting non-conformist pensioners into the community.

So what could a clergy person bring to this situation where there was a scarcity of resource – financial and spiritual? There was a woeful absence of human giftedness and energy on offer. At that time there were two kinds of responses to the needs of the community from the non-conformist churches in the neighbourhood, which could be fairly neatly divided into an evangelical and a more liberal approach.

One church in the community which would have identified with a liberal theological position had a very entrepreneurial minister who set about identifying social need and locating funding with which to meet that need. The church he produced by this means was a hive of activity all week. The cash generated by the various programmes certainly helped the church to pay its bills. The community was significantly impacted during his time in office, but unfortunately the church did not grow and when the next couple of ministers were unable to reproduce the same entrepreneurial spirit and skill the church was eventually forced to close its doors.

The evangelical approach was to see the community as a recruiting ground from which a viable Christian community could be built. This activity was largely unrelated to the broader community apart from developing friendships and meeting a limited number of local needs so that more people could be welcomed into the life of the church.

That was essentially the approach that the church I served took and to a certain extent it worked in that the worshipping congregation went up from around 30 people to just over a hundred. Offerings increased to the point where viability in terms of paying the basic bills was achieved and a certain number of individuals in the community were undoubtedly helped. But the broader community was essentially unchanged. More problematically in terms of building a genuinely local expression of community, power remained with those who commuted and those who came from the community were essentially made to feel dependent.

Not surprisingly many who at first felt so warmly welcomed eventually drifted away, some to other churches and some to no church at all. That church still exists but does not have sufficient members to pay a great deal for ministry though they do meet the other basic needs that enable them to meet Sunday by Sunday.

So why recount that story, after all, that all took place some 40 years ago – almost a working life ago? To some extent I tell the story because it also encourages me to see what has been learnt since then.

Engaging with the Community

There has been much talk and accompanying action about reconnecting with the neighbourhood or community in recent years. That raises a question as to why such talk is necessary in the first place. The language of reconnection suggests that a connection has been lost. The extent of that loss has been surprising. Even as recently as the late 1950's, the beginning of what McLeod calls the long 1960's[1] , the church was at the centre of most communities and clergy had social standing. The idea that the church would not form a moral and functional centre for public life was almost unimaginable by most ordinary people.

Part of the reason for the church seeming to be at the centre of community life is that for the previous 150 years the church had been vigorous in its involvement with the day to day life of communities of all kinds. In particular, in many parts of Europe, as the population moved from the countryside to the towns and cities the church was not only present to offer a narrative of hope to the many dislocated migrants but in many ways helped to shape the very nature of community itself. Some have argued that very notion of suburbia was an evangelical idea – the creation of a sanitized form of the countryside, close enough to city centres to provide employment, but far enough away to offer a degree of safety for the healthy development of family life.[2]

In the United States, the Second Great Awakening produced a spiritual impetus that moved with the frontier. As Americans moved west there grew a feeling that a new settlement – town, village or hamlet, could not really be a fully formed community without the church. That outcome was not the result of denominational church planting strategies so much as an outpouring of the spiritual energies and aspirations of millions of lay people. In both Europe and America we are dealing with spiritual movements of a grass roots nature.[3]

For 150 years as a modern industrial society emerged in the west, the church was the place where leadership was formed, gifts were nurtured, in the case of the African American churches considerable gifts in terms of music, the needs of families were met, social welfare organized, basic health care encouraged, education offered and children cared for. The church (or chapel) was the natural place where communities focused social life.

The Sunday School anniversary was often the best organized festival in the village and the Sunday School outing often the furthest that many ordinary people ventured out of their community. The travel agent Thomas Cook began life organizing Sunday School outings for churches in Leicester. The church was valued, belonged to the people, was a natural expression of the aspirations of many and in particular was trusted to shape the horizons of the children of every community. In excess of 75% of children in Great Britain were enrolled in a Protestant Sunday School until the outbreak of the First World War in 1914.[4] As Callum Brown suggests the loss of this position seemed to be sudden and decisive.[5]

This is not the place to debate the reasons for that disconnection in any detail although it is probably worth noting that the churches with the greatest connection in the 1950's were the denominations that identified broadly with a liberal theological tradition. They wished to be relevant to the communities they served and in many ways that theological tradition seemed to allow the church an ongoing voice in the affairs of society.

What may have been missed at the time was that this contribution was increasingly a professional involvement on the part of respected and trained clergy as compared with a more popular connection fired by the spiritual commitments of lay people. As with all such sweeping generalizations there were many exceptions to this description but in general a shift had occurred.

A more evangelical tradition had not been in the mainstream of societal life for at least half a century by the time of the late 1950's. As David Runcorn comments so succinctly:

> *For the first 60 years of the last century evangelicals were a beleaguered minority. They kept themselves separate, contributed very little to the political, social or theological debates of their day and were experienced by the watching world as defensive and reactionary.*[6]
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> As David Runcorn also suggests, the evangelical church has experienced an astonishing renewal throughout the very period when church membership and attendance has been in more general decline.[7] That renewal has been across a wide evangelical spectrum – evangelicals standing in a Reformed tradition, Classical Pentecostals and a number of waves of Charismatics, some of whom have remained in the historic churches and some of whom have formed new denominations and large independent congregations.
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> In some cases there have been some interesting combinations of these traditions in the shape of new denominations with a charismatic experience and a reformed doctrine. Mostly, that renewal has occurred in settings that have been largely disconnected to local communities. With some notable exceptions to which we will return, these have been gathered congregations of the faithful with little success in serving local communities. In some cases the very choice of location and building design reflects that intent. Large auditoriums have been preferred, located to allow ease of access for commuting congregations. There are no windows in the main centre, no outlook to the neighbouring community. The rationale for such a windowless environment derives from the need to be able to use data projectors and other production features. The worship experience is an event more like a performance from the front with little interaction or involvement from the audience.
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> Throughout this time there have been some pioneering congregations, often located in situations of urban deprivation which have signaled a different quality of commitment to the surrounding community.[8] Increasingly other congregations and sometimes whole networks of churches, have taken note of what has been achieved evangelistically through such engagement.

> These vital experiments have been mirrored by an upsurge in evangelical involvement in a wide range of social agencies from overseas aid through to social justice campaigns.[9] Concern for the future of children, the poor, the marginalized and the deeply damaged has emerged as evangelicals have rediscovered their own history, social conscience and indeed call of the gospel message itself.[10]
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> There is ample evidence from a range of publications, campaigns and even the creation of new organizations[11] to indicate that evangelicals have developed a new seriousness about how they might engage with their community[12] or "re-enter the neighbourhood", to use the language of Alan Roxburgh.[13] On both sides of the Atlantic there has been a rediscovery of evangelical heroes such as the Clapham Sect and in particular William Wilberforce. These have often been the motifs that have been used to weave a more "this worldly" understanding of the Kingdom.

More than Method

At one level this is all very encouraging. It is profoundly important for evangelicals to regain the passion for campaigning and societal change for which they were well known in the 19th century. However there are also obvious dangers that accompany this new enthusiasm to engage. It is all too easy at a pragmatic level to interpret engagement as just another programme that will prove to be more evangelistically effective than stand alone Alpha courses.

There is a long tradition flowing from the Church Growth movement that suggests that evangelicals have long known that to be effective one has to take "Presence" evangelism seriously, that relationships have to be built before the gospel can be shared, that the meeting of human need helps to earn the right to speak, that acts of kindness lead people to be more receptive to the gospel. All this is true and yet if that is all that social engagement consists of then one is left with a deep sense of unease. This sounds like an attempt to manipulate rather than to wash the feet of the poor. It can easily become just another methodology to get people through our doors rather than an attempt to express a loving presence in the community.

Not only would this descent into cynical methodology be deeply disturbing from the perspective of the heart of the gospel, there are a number of other aspects that would call such a collapse into technique into question. In two very significant ways such action risks capitulation to the very culture that we are called to convert. First, modernity has a strong culture of "technique" at its core. The reductionist heart of reason and science suggests that all problems can be studied and through careful analysis a solution, whether a programme, a product or a method, or combination thereof, can be found and applied. A particular and known outcome can be predicted.

Second, one of the gospel's inherent objections to modernity has been that this "cause and effect" approach to reality not only rules God out of the picture, other than as a distant prime mover, it also leads to a view of people as objects. The tendency of global capitalism to commodify everything and everyone reinforces the kind of de-personalization of those we are called to love and acts to undermine the very gospel we seek to proclaim. For many good reasons we have to be clear that love can never be

a technique. What human relationship could survive such a cynical approach?

Christians are wedded to the idea that the "other" person with whom we seek to communicate has to be treated with the same deep, unfathomable love with which God treats us. To use Buber's language the other person is never a statistic or a marketing target and must become for us an honoured "thou". In addition this honoured "other" has potential insights into the gospel which could only be revealed through them. As our gospel has come to us through scripture and tradition, but understood through our lives and contexts, so another will encounter the gospel uniquely. Through encounter there is the possibility that we and they will encounter God at new depth. We will both be changed.

The cross has always been at the centre of the Evangelical approach to the gospel. But David Runcorn comments that *theologically the stress on the cross is now expressed alongside the doctrine of the incarnation*[14] and it is a recent re-affirmation of the essential connection between these two doctrines that so typifies the recent renewal of evangelical thought and action. It is the model of God's incarnation that underlies our evangelism, and that reverence for the person in all their particularity of culture, time and place. The powerless cross models a willing vulnerability in all encounters.

There are techniques, insights, orientations and even programmes which can be taught and which can help us to listen to people and communities. But that is part of our difficulty. For example, we do need to learn how to listen anew, we will do well to learn about team, about the handling of conflict, of how the creative arts can help us to communicate in fresh and dynamic ways. In the same way we can learn to attend to God, to notice God presence afresh in our surroundings. Choosing to engage with spiritual disciplines has always been a hallmark of the mature Christian. But such fresh learning must never corrupt our basic appreciation of the "thou", the sacred, the divine in others, indeed it should assist it.

Power and the Meeting of Need

In the midst of this new learning, which is powerful and therefore capable of abuse, we also need to grapple again with the issue of power itself. We have not addressed the question in this article as to what happened to the evangelical movement in the 19th and very early 20th century. How could a movement that was so profoundly influential in shaping culture more widely and local communities so creatively, have lost its influence so suddenly?

I want to suggest that all successful movements find it difficult to deal with the problem of their own success, partly because few of us see success as a problem. The history of mission suggests that just as we obtain our dearest desire, seeing our friends and neighbours, indeed those we never thought would even consider the gospel message, entering the church, at a deep, deep level we are undone, hence the exit of the saints from the church to the desert.

Is this simply an impossible difficulty for which there is no answer and which condemns us forever to a cycle of success, denouement, repentance and recovery? In one way we have to be realistic and say that it does, at least insofar as we have to learn afresh to interpret the gospel in every cultural setting and

culture is never static. But in another sense we might be able to set the stage in such a way that the learning process is ongoing and complacency resisted.

We have surfaced two related problems which arise from an abuse of power. The first is commodification, treating people as mere evangelistic targets. The second is a complacent response to influence and impact. I want to propose at least three potential resources and priorities that can help us avoid these dual problems. All three of these resources are aids to the creation of a particular kind of community. This is the heart of the point I want to make. Our approach to the community we seek to serve can only be kept healthy if the community that does the serving is itself healthy and pays attention in an ongoing and appropriate manner to that same health. Service to others must never deteriorate into an abuse of self or a failure to love oneself appropriately. To put it tritely, we can't love others if we don't love ourselves. What are these resources?

Firstly theological thought itself is a resource to be rediscovered. Ellen T. Charry has written eloquently on the need for the church to rescue theology from its academic captivity. For Charry, there is a need for a theology of wisdom or sapential insight which is valued as much as a theology of issues of truth.[15] The surrender of theology to the categories of the Enlightenment concerning epistemology have rendered theology unable to speak about God and that has left theology wounded and unable to serve either the Christian community or indeed the wider world.

> *Theology today lives on the margins of the secular culture, the margins of the academy, and the margins of the church. It could be that responsibility for this marginalization lies equally with a desacralized culture and with the field of theology itself. Perhaps the renewal of theology is not unlike the renewal of the Christians about whom our theological teachers worried, as a mother cares for a child who has lost her way in a confusing world. She must be healed before she can flourish again.*[16]
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> How might that healing take place? In Charry's view there is an issue about the *modern values of individuality, autonomy, and freedom*.[17] These values have Christian roots, but have been cut adrift, acquiring new meanings in the process. So for her the Trinity is of immense importance as a theological theme and needs to balance the western emphasis on the doctrine of the cross. It is the Trinity that allows us to come to what she calls the third pivot of the Christian self, which as we have seen above must be grounded in God.[18] She writes:
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> *The third of the three distinguishing pivots of the Christian self is its belonging in the body of Christ. Divine guidance takes place in the community of the faithful. While the secular emancipation narrative encourages the self to free itself from formative and socializing influences that might thwart self-expression, the Christian seeks formation in the midst of an ordered community in order to prepare itself for a cross-defined life that may move across the grain of the dominant culture.*[19]
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> The second resource in the armoury is the recovery of the spiritual disciplines. One of the

curious realities about spiritual disciplines is that at one level they insist that we face our own, very individual relationship with God. In that sense we are alone with God. Prayer, periods of intentional silence and listening, reflection on the scripture and fasting all have the potential to throw us into a deep isolation with God. Commodification, complacency and indeed all our ego agendas fall away in the hiddeness of this isolation. And the God we meet in such isolation is a God who is, as God, living in community, and this triune God deals with us in our isolation in such a way that we are impelled to consider afresh our relationship with others. This is not an aloneness that leaves us in isolation. Even the hermit is called to be alone to pray for others, not for himself.

Thirdly life within the Eucharistic community is a resource. What does it mean to live as a Eucharistic community? Clearly it must mean more than the simple act of a regular celebration of the Eucharist in a strictly liturgical sense, although it is not for nothing that the Catholic tradition emphasizes that wherever the Eucharist is celebrated the church is somehow created. It is not for nothing that much of the Protestant tradition draws the community together in order to celebrate the Eucharist. Eucharist, either in creating the community or in giving community a focal point is always wedded to the idea of community itself.

But the point about the Eucharist in such a setting is that it tells a story that helps us to define something of who we are as a community. It is by living in this story – not this story alone, but this story particularly, that we learn something about how to be a community of God's people able to serve in non coercive, sacrificial ways that challenge the fundamental forces of evil and call a new reality, a heavenly banquet into being.

As Stanley Hauerwas suggests, *The sacraments enact the story of Jesus and, thus, form a community in his image*.[20] By re-enacting the last supper we are drawn inevitably to the meaning that it had originally for the people of Israel but also to the meaning that Jesus invested in it. His sacrificial death, or more precisely the reality that God himself was going to lay down power, all power, as his response to the violence of evil, crashes in on history as something dramatically different, as a disclosure of the nature of God utterly unlike anything that Israel had experienced previously. This story, above all other stories, calls us to redemptive, costly love in our relationship with our community. Frequent participation in this feast helps to create the kind of community that can never be comfortable with attempts to coerce commitment and belief even if such a thing were ever truly viable.

We are called to live in the story, not our story but The Story so that in time, our story becomes evermore closely conformed to The Story.

Rapid Response

A Rapid Response to “Community of the Cross”

1. Hugh McLeod, “Introduction,” in The Decline of Christendom in Western Europe, 1750-2000, ed. Hugh McLeod and Werner Ustorf (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 18. ↩
2. See Schlossberg on the issue of evangelicalism as the founder and shaper of Victorian society. Herbert Schlossberg, *The Silent Revolution and the Making of Victorian England* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2000). ↩
3. See Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, “How the Upstart Sects Won America: 1776-1850,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 28, 1, (1989) 27-44. ↩
4. Callum G. Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain* (London: Routledge, 2001) 168. ↩
5. Brown, *Death of Christian Britain*, 1. ↩
6. David Runcorn, *Spirituality Workbook: A Guide for Explorers, Pilgrims and Seekers* (London: SPCK, 2006), 43. ↩
7. Runcorn, *Spirituality Workbook*, 43. ↩
8. For example the Eden Network. http://eden-network.org/ (Last accessed 2.7.12) ↩
9. *Micah Challenge* is an example of an international movement for global justice which arose from within the evangelical context. ↩
10. Tom Wright, *Surprised by Hope* (London: SPCK, 2007), 224. ↩
11. For example Serve (www.communitymission.org.uk) is a new initiative in holistic mission instigated by the Evangelical Alliance. Redeeming our Communities (www.roc.uk.com) enables local partnerships for community cohesion and transformation. ↩
12. Scot McKnight helpfully describes the shift in the church from a personal salvation centred gospel towards a kingdom focus. See Scot McKnight, “Atonement and Gospel,” in *Church in the Present Tense: A Candid Look at What’s Emerging* ed. Kevin Corcoran (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2011), 123-39. ↩
13. Alan J. Roxburgh, *Missional: Joining God in the Neighbourhood* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011). ↩
14. Runcorn, *Spirituality Workbook*, 43. ↩
15. Ellen T. Charry, *By the Renewing of your Minds: The Pastoral Function of Christian Doctrine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 238. ↩
16. Charry, *Renewing of your Minds*, 245. ↩
17. Ellen T. Charry, “The Crisis of Modernity and the Christian Self,” in *A Passion for God’s Reign*, ed. Miroslav Volf (Cambridge: Eerdmans, 1998) 95. ↩
18. Charry, Crisis of Modernity, 104-108. The first two of Charry’s pivots are *dwelling in the dignity of God, [and] heeding the call and cross of Jesus Christ*. 104. ↩
19. Charry, *Crisis of Modernity*, 108. ↩
20. Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics*. 2nd ed. (London: SCM Press, 2003) 107. ↩

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