



God's Belongers



David Walker

How people engage with God today and how the church can help

The Bible Reading Fellowship

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The Bible Reading Fellowship (BRF) is a Registered Charity (233280)

ISBN 978 0 85746 467 5

First published 2017

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 0

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A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY



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Foreword

Whenever the church gets to talking about numbers, sooner or later someone will protest that it is not all about bums on seats, is it? Well, yes and no. As this readable and insightful book from David Walker makes clear, belonging cannot simply be measured by your attendance record. There are multiple ways of belonging to any organisation or community, and especially the church. But if instead of 'bums on seats' the church talked about 'hearts being changed' or 'lives being transformed', and once we realise that there can be no impact in our local communities and wider society unless there are at least some people who not only belong, but whose belonging shapes and directs the whole of their lives, i.e. their hearts are being changed and their lives are being transformed, then we begin to see that understanding how people belong and ministering to people in their different ways of belonging is something worth thinking about. This book will help you.

The Rt Revd Stephen Cottrell
Bishop of Chelmsford

Introduction: an aid for mission

What's this book about?

I'm the twelfth person to hold the title of Bishop of Manchester since the diocese was created in 1847. Only one of us, William Temple, has gone on to greater things, first as Archbishop of York and then, all too briefly, to Canterbury. It was Temple who coined the statement that the Church is the only institution ever to be created for the benefit of those who are not its members. It's a wonderfully succinct phrase. It captures the notions of both our pastoral and evangelistic ministry to the communities and nations within which we, the Church, have been set. It brings with it a strong whiff that we are indeed a 'priestly people', called for the good of others. True to his own vision, Temple was co-founder of the post-World War II Welfare State.

If Temple had the great vision, then it was around 40 years after his death that the worldwide Anglican Communion put the next level of detail into it, through the promulgation of the *Five Marks of Mission*. This balanced agenda of evangelism, nurture, care for the needy, concern for the environment and challenge to injustice has won wide respect and support from around the world. It continues to provide a checklist, lest the Church be tempted to reduce the scope of its mission to some smaller, narrower, more congenial subset. But it recognises that the way in which mission is embodied, in vastly different societies and cultures, will vary.

This book is my personal attempt to grapple with Temple's vision. It's founded in the simple premise that if we want to be the Church for those who are not our members, then the first thing we have to do

is to get to know them. God so loved the world that he sent his Son, Jesus, to live among us. It isn't just an accident of history, the lack of the modern mechanisms of communicating remotely, that meant that most of what he did, he did face to face. Jesus listened to people, absorbed their stories and then responded. The stories that he told show how acutely he was observing the society around him, everything from the natural phenomena of the weather through to the overt and hidden motivations that underlie human actions.

For us to claim to be continuing Christ's mission, yet to bypass the effort to understand the people and society around us, seems to me to be a contradiction in terms. And yet it's a trap that churches all too often fall into. We take our mission directly from our theology, or from what somebody tells us we ought to be doing, or from what is most congenial and least threatening to our own preferences. Bishops can be just as guilty as anyone else at trying to impose mission priorities and initiatives across the hugely diverse territory of our dioceses as though they had been handed down on tablets of stone. We need to be humble enough to take the time to observe, and observe carefully, the people and places around us. Much of what is written here is my own attempt to do just that. It draws on 17 years of parish ministry and another 15 as bishop. Many of the examples of mission that I give are taken directly from my own experience. To that extent, this is the sort of book that many reflective Christian ministers could write, and indeed many do. The way I've done that reflection, however, is very much rooted in my own personal story. And for that I need to tell you a little about my earlier background.

In the autumn of 1979, as a young graduate student who had just begun a doctorate in Pure Mathematics, I went to see the dean of my college chapel to explain that I had a problem. For some time I'd been aware of a growing sense of vocation to ordained ministry. I'd tried to do a deal with God, whereby I would continue in research until I reached the age of 30, after which I'd happily go into pastoral ministry. But God wouldn't shake hands on it. The call had become increasingly urgent. I needed to offer myself for ordination now. I can't remember a great deal of what

the dean said to me, except for one thing. He assured me that, though I might be giving up mathematics for now, God would find some way of using my abilities and aptitudes at some point in the future. By the following autumn I was at Queen's Theological College in Birmingham.

For the next quarter of a century my mathematical abilities went on the back burner. And then, almost by chance, I discovered, right at the point when I was about to undertake my first-ever clergy sabbatical, a group of theologians who had a use for numbers. Empirical Theology takes as its particular focus the understanding of how people, in many cases ordinary Christians or members of wider society, live out their lives. It examines their beliefs, attitudes and behaviours. It listens, with the same care and attention with which Jesus himself listened, to what people have to say about themselves and about God. A lot of its work is through interviewing individuals and building up a picture from case studies. But some of it involves numbers, more precisely, statistics. Its sister fields of research are those of the Sociology and Psychology of Religion. Empirical Theology adds to what study in those fields can achieve by providing an overt theological as well as a general academic analysis of what is being observed.

The two things that mathematicians play with are most simply summarised as patterns and numbers. What you will find in this book are the patterns that emerged when I began to conduct statistical surveys among groups of people who turned up in churches on special occasions, along with a few of the most important numbers. Underlying what I've written is, at times, some quite sophisticated statistical analysis. If you are minded to try to understand that stuff, then there are a whole series of academic papers in which I set out and published my findings, so that they could be scrutinised by the best academic minds in the field. You'll find a list of some of them at the back of this book. But for the sake of the vast majority of readers, many of whom will have given up maths with some relief in their mid-teens, you won't find much by way of statistical argument or proof here in this present text.

The figures I use for most of my statistics come from two surveys that I carried out. The first, in the autumn of 2007, was a study of around 1450 people who turned up at rural Harvest services in my then diocese of Worcester. It was a remarkable response rate and I'm extremely grateful to the clergy and lay leaders in the 27 parishes that took part for allowing my questionnaire to be completed in their churches, usually before or after the service. I was able to ask questions about why people had come to the service, what they believed about the Christian faith, their attitudes to various public issues, and their relationships with other Christians in their community, as well as how often they came to church, read the Bible and said their prayers.

The second survey took place in Worcester, at the two main cathedral carol services in the immediate run up to Christmas 2009. A slightly shorter version of it was then repeated at Lichfield Cathedral the following year. Once again, I need to express my thanks to their respective deans, chapters and volunteers, especially the sidesmen and women who handed out and collected in hundreds of survey forms, right in the middle of their busiest time of year. The phenomenon of going to church at Christmas has long fascinated me, and this study allowed me to put a whole range of questions to a group of people, almost half of whom admitted to coming to church no more than a handful of times a year. Why were they there? What did they make of the Christmas story? What degree of previous or present church background did they have? What were their views on some topical religious issues?

In addition, the Worcester survey added two final sections which were based on important areas within Empirical Theology, Psychological Type and Religious Orientation. But more of that later.

As well as to mathematics, this book owes a great deal to the concept of a 'Theology of Individual Differences'. At its simplest this begins with the precept that God has made each of us, each in his own image, and yet each of us different and unique. If he had wanted to make us all the same, that option was available. Individual difference exists, not in

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order that some should be saved and others condemned, as some of the reformer John Calvin's disciples have argued, but because it is part of the richness of creation.

The call of God is a universal call. It is to be issued to all, and in the form they will best be able to hear and respond to. If what we observe is that some groups in our society, who should be equally able to hear the call, appear to be responding to different extents, then that ought to be a cause of concern. And indeed, where it is observable, it often is. We rightly worry when church congregations seem to contain far too few men, or younger adults, or those living with disabilities or people from different ethnic backgrounds. But that is because such differences are often highly visible. What about the other, invisible but equally important, differences that might be reflected in lower numbers of certain types of people appearing to respond to God's call? Should it not equally be a cause for concern if our churches were almost exclusively populated by, for example, extraverts? Would that not suggest that we had got something just as wrong in the ways we are articulating God's call as if almost all churchgoers were male?

The first section of this book sets out one particular way in which I have found people differ, namely in the ways in which they experience and enact belonging. In the first chapter I will set out a model in which I describe how people belong to God and to the church in four distinct ways: through people, places, one-off events and regular activities. The next four chapters then go on to look at each of these dimensions in turn. Each of them is informed by the two surveys that I carried out as part of my research, and I've given a few examples of that in the text. This model of belonging does, however, pose a challenge to some traditional ways of thinking about Church and mission.

This challenge lies in the fact that only one of the four dimensions of belonging has a direct relationship with coming frequently to church. There's a lot of evidence from other studies that there are people who have ceased to be a part of a regular church congregation, other than by way of incapacity, and yet who retain in all other aspects, and not

just for a period of time, strong evidence of their Christian faith and practice. Is it possible to be a 'good Christian' and yet not go, or at least not go very often, to church? What would such a model of faith look like? And if we find, as I believe we do, examples of it, is it something that should be encouraged for its own sake, or is the entirety of our mission effort to be directed towards increasing congregational membership? To put it bluntly, are we in mission to help people become, and become better, disciples of Jesus, or to help them become, and become better, committed members of our regular worshipping community?

The final chapter in this section is something of a 'worked example'. I've taken a look at how Church of England congregations who wish to receive Holy Communion on more frequent occasions than the pattern of availability of the vicar, or any other priest attached to their parish, seek to respond to the Church's official option of 'Communion by Extension'. More specifically, I've shown how what is actually going on in the middle of often difficult negotiations and arguments is a very good example of all four of the dimensions of the belonging model coming into play.

The second part of the book turns the spotlight more deliberately onto people who come to church, but only occasionally. Following the model of the previous section I want to think of the ways in which people, places and single events mediate for them a sense of Christian belonging. We will try to look at them not as those who are lukewarm in their faith, or simply less committed than you or me. The first chapter, in particular, will seek to dispel the notion that they are just practitioners of 'Christianity-Lite', by examining their beliefs and attitudes. The following chapter takes us explicitly into the area of the Anglican *Five Marks of Mission* to which I referred at the beginning. When I first began to write the paper behind the chapter, it was intended to explore how a local church might engage with occasional churchgoers as the recipients of mission. But the more I reflected, and the more I looked at what I had been discovering through the development of my model of belonging, the more I became convinced that this was missing the most important point. People who engage with the Christian faith and

its local community through people, places and single events are not just the object of our mission but are also co-workers with us in carrying it out. Indeed, it may well be that engaging them in mission work is a far better way of enabling them to grow in their faith than seeing them exclusively as on the receiving end of our efforts.

The final chapter of this section began to emerge as I was putting together a collection of my writings as part of the process of being awarded a research doctorate. It offers another worked example. This time it is about the ways in which both the governance model for the Church of England, and the ways in which the Church is financed, have moved over time in a direction that places responsibility and power almost exclusively in the hands of those who belong in one particular of our four modes.

The third section of the book takes us beyond the fourfold belonging model in order to look at some of the other ways in which particular sorts of people may be less numerically present in churches than we ought to expect. We will take a look first at the notion of Psychological Type, familiar to many clergy at least through the popular Myers-Briggs Type Indicator®, and then go on to explore a somewhat less well-known but important topic, the concept of Religious Orientation. I'm indebted to my research colleagues, especially the Revd Canon Professor Leslie Francis, who have studied these concepts in other places and kindly allowed me to add to my Worcester Carol Service survey the specially designed and tested sets of questions that are used, in order to assess them in ways that are both statistically reliable but don't make the questionnaire too long to complete. As in earlier sections, I will want to look at who is less often to be found in church. Because the same questions have been asked of other, regular Sunday church congregations, there's also the opportunity to explore whether or not carol services offer a wider or different appeal. The nature of the concepts that we are dealing with in these chapters means that this is probably the part of the book that has the most numbers in it. But even here it is the arguments that matter; the numbers are principally there to back them up. Once again, the section will conclude with a

worked example. In this case I want to focus on the implications for Sunday worship of having an awareness of the differences in Type and Orientation that exist among Christians.

Although I enjoy study, I don't pretend to be an academic. The decision I took back in 1979, and which thankfully the Church of England endorsed, to leave the world of research and become a clergyman instead, was clear and permanent. What I am, like many Christian clergy, is a 'reflective practitioner'. I try to think about the people I meet and the situations I find myself and my church in, and to do so using the best tools available to me. Writing down what I have been thinking about, and submitting it to the test of publication in the academic press, is part of what helps me to ensure my reasoning is as clear and accurate as I can make it. But my principle aim is to support and encourage the work of the Church in mission and ministry. To that end you will find in the chapters that follow plenty of examples of how things are working and how they might be made to work better. I'd be disappointed if many people read this book without at some point coming across an idea that they would want to try out in their own church or context. When you do come across such ideas, I hope the book might also provide hints as to what you might have to do to make them happen, and some of the reasons why you might find yourself meeting obstacles and objections along the way. I've set out three or four questions at the end of each chapter, which may help to focus your thoughts, especially if you are reading this book as part of a group. All in all it is about how churches might move to a better informed ministry. It's about paying attention and listening to the people God has placed around us, either directly or by using research tools. It's about trying to make our mission a bit more incarnational. It's about how, in this particular aspect of our being the Church, we imitate Christ.

Questions

- Do you think that William Temple's statement about the Church is true?
- How relevant is it to the call of the Church today?
- How much does it matter if Christian churches only reflect a part of the wider population?
- Is it important to understand how people differ?

Chapter 8

Together in mission: the *Five Marks of Mission*

In 1984 the Anglican Consultative Council produced a concise statement of Anglican mission applicable across the 38 diverse provinces that make up the global Anglican Communion. These *Five Marks of Mission*, adopted internationally at the 1988 Lambeth Conference, were endorsed in 1996 by the General Synod of the Church of England and have since been taken up by many dioceses as criteria against which to evaluate both existing work and new ventures. They are currently found with minor local variations of wording, but most commonly in the form developed between 1984 and 1990:

- To proclaim the good news of the kingdom
- To teach, baptise and nurture new believers
- To respond to human need by loving service
- To seek to transform unjust structures of society
- To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and to sustain the life of the earth.⁶

The *Five Marks of Mission* featured in the preparatory Reader issued on arrival to all participating bishops in the 2008 Lambeth Conference, and underpinned one of the key themes of the gathering—‘The Bishop in Mission’. The Marks are not restricted to the description of the activity of some small core religious group directed towards the world outside. Rather, they guide the Church towards identifying programmes of action to which all who would self-identify with the Christian faith can be called as both the agents of mission and the objects of mission. The wide view of mission activity that they encompass offers possibilities for engagement that might in principle attract those not easily drawn by narrower definitions; in particular they create opportunities to recruit

and engage in mission tasks those who express Christian belonging but, perhaps because they belong primarily through people, places and events, are occasional rather than frequent churchgoers.

Surprisingly, despite both their widespread acceptance and recommendation for contextualisation, I found little or no evidence of anybody applying statistical methods to clarify how they might be applied. It seemed worth having a go. In particular, the responses I'd collected from my Harvest survey made it possible to look at the ways different people belong, using the model in the earlier chapters, and to reflect on what the Marks of Mission tell us might be a framework for how to engage both with and alongside the occasional churchgoers who seem to be such an important dimension of Anglican belonging. But let's first look again at the two groups of churchgoers we were introduced to in the last chapter.

Who did we find?

When the gender splits of our two groups of frequent and occasional Harvest service attendees were compared, there was no significant difference between the proportions of men and women. However, it was a different story when their ages were examined. Some 30 per cent of occasional churchgoers were aged between 20 and 49, more than twice the proportion among the regulars. The middle age range of 50 to 69 years was similar for both groups, whilst at the upper end of the scale, 20 per cent of occasional attendees were aged 70 or over compared with 35 per cent of regular churchgoers. The age distribution for the occasional churchgoers does not exhibit the strong skew towards the older end of the range that is clearly demonstrated for the weekly attendees. This might encourage us to think that an event such as Harvest Festival can have an important role to play in enabling churches to reach out towards a significantly younger group than regular activities achieve.

How do they spend their time?

We've seen that the occasional churchgoers were noticeably younger. So what do they do for a living? When asked, over a third claimed to '*hold down a demanding job*'. One in six worked from home and one in eight had a job based on '*land or agriculture*'. Patterns of church belonging and of engagement in mission that fit well with the patterns of retirement living that predominate among the regular churchgoers are not necessarily going to be readily accessible to those with demanding employment. On the other hand, working-age people may have significant mission opportunities that are not addressed by an assumption that church is part of leisure activities.

How do they fit into the local community?

A long while ago, I began to notice that there seemed a large overlap between people who were involved in church and those who I met at other events and activities in the community. The same names and faces would appear in a variety of settings. As I've set out earlier in this book, they are probably people for whom belonging through taking part in regular committed activities is more important than it is for lots of others. So how did the Harvest congregations measure in terms of getting involved in other things?

The answers I received were probably some of the most positive and encouraging in the whole of the survey. Both groups demonstrated that they were very well connected into community life.

We began with a general statement, '*There are people here I meet at other community activities*', which sought to tease out whether the church community in general engages significantly with other local groups. Two-thirds of regular churchgoers agreed, as did well over half of the occasional ones. We noticed earlier that belonging through people scored pretty highly for the Harvest congregations. What this adds is real evidence that the relationship networks which people form

are not within a closed circle, but have extensive overlaps with other contexts in which members of the local community meet. And it's not just the regular churchgoers who have these strong connections.

Community 'activity' is a pretty broad phrase. Although I've tried increasingly to restrict my own use of the word 'activity' to meetings and groups that have a regularity and sense of commitment about them, I was a bit less rigorous when I wrote the questionnaire. Almost certainly those agreeing with it would have taken a less restrictive definition, one that included summer fairs and village festivals, the things that I've tried to distinguish as 'events'.

Fortunately, the next statement, *'I am involved in other groups in this area'* puts the focus more strongly on 'activities' in my narrower sense. Unsurprisingly, for both groups the levels of agreement were lower. Among the regular churchgoers there was a small drop of seven per cent, down to three in five agreeing. For those who come to church only occasionally, the drop was much larger, down 16 per cent to just over two in five. The larger fall among the occasional churchgoers fits well with the theory we've been developing and with what we've seen earlier. It suggests that this group, who come only occasionally to church, are also less inclined to make the regular commitment to some form of group membership in the wider community. However, at two in five, it's still a large enough figure to suggest that these are not people who are completely unwilling to join in with things that may require them to commit.

There are, of course, many reasons for people not belonging to groups. Some will just lack the inclination. But it may equally be a lack of time, especially for those who said they had a demanding job. For others, particularly in less densely populated areas, it might be that they have things they would like to do as part of a group, but there aren't appropriate gatherings to join. Hence, the third statement put to the Harvest congregations, *'I enjoy community organisations'*, moved the focus from what people are actually doing now to what they believe they would enjoy doing. For the regular churchgoers there was no

discernable difference from the answers to the previous question. For the occasional churchgoers it was a very different story, rising by a full 15 per cent. There are clearly a sizeable group of people coming occasionally to church who are not put off by making a commitment to an organisation, but aren't making that commitment to churchgoing. We will turn our attention more directly to what the blockages might be for some of them in the third section of this book.

The final question in this section put the spotlight firmly on the church, by inviting responses to the statement, '*Being part of the church helps me to feel at home in this community.*' I'd expected this to attract a strong level of support from the people who go to church a lot, and indeed almost three-quarters of them agreed with it. More surprising was the fact that almost half of those rarely in church also agreed. By doing so they were clearly saying two quite important things. First of all, it's a very strong statement that they do think of themselves as '*part of this church*'. That points very firmly towards their identifying primarily through the other three dimensions of our model: events, people and the place itself. Secondly, it's a declaration that belonging to the local church makes a real difference in their sense of belonging in the wider community.

Summarising occasional Harvest churchgoers

Having looked particularly at the ways in which both regular and occasional churchgoers connect to the local community, we're almost ready to set this alongside the *Five Marks of Mission* and see what avenues of approach will emerge. But let's just prepare by way of offering a short pen picture of our occasional churchgoers, both what we've explored so far in this chapter and what we've learned about them earlier on.

Our occasional attendees are much more varied in age than frequent churchgoers, and therefore more likely to be of working age. Many have demanding jobs, though only a small minority in specifically

rural industries. They are well linked to the frequent churchgoers in their community through friendships, though they feel much less close to the church community as an entity. A significant minority feel well known by people in the congregation and even by the vicar. They identify strongly with the notion of having a 'family church'. Friendship plays a part for some in encouraging them to come to a church event. When they do turn up, they report the church as being welcoming. They are less likely than frequent churchgoers to have involvements in other local groups, but profess a positive attitude to community organisations, and they associate their church belonging with helping them to feel at home in the community. Place matters mostly to them because of its family associations rather than the building for its own sake. Only about half of them feel close to God in church.

With this characterisation we can now investigate how occasional churchgoers engage alongside frequent attendees, as both agents and recipients of mission activity, using the *Five Marks of Mission* as our framework.

Pastoral care

At the heart of the ecclesiology of the Church of England is the concept of the 'cure of souls' of all the people who reside in or are on the electoral roll of a parish, irrespective of their participation in church activities. It is closely related to the Mark of Mission '*Respond to human need by loving service*'. This cure resides first in the bishop but is explicitly shared with clergy at their licensings and institutions. The belief that there was once a long period of time throughout which England's parish clergy lived out this calling through personal engagement with the whole community is largely myth. It was only 19th-century reforms that began to eliminate the practice of pluralism, through which an individual could assemble a comfortable income by being incumbent of several parishes spread across the whole of England. Similar legal changes made it unlawful for the priest to live outside the benefice, unless he had the express and written agreement of the bishop. Nevertheless,

the pastoral model continues to represent an important aspiration and the link to the authorisation by the bishop gives a counterbalance to congregationalism.

With the reduction in stipendiary clergy, a corresponding increase in Readers and a proliferation of formal and informal ministries, the last century, especially its final decades, has seen the priest moving to the role of convener and overseer of pastoral ministry provided by a team of lay and ordained people, rather than being the sole local supplier. Where the vicar is not resident in the immediate locality, as is the case in the majority of rural communities, that raises particular questions as to the importance of whether we can have identifiable individuals who can be seen as embodying 'the church' in each place.

What we've seen demonstrates that for many occasional churchgoers, the vicar is not only visible in the local community but also perceived as knowing his or her parishioners well. That this is still being achieved among a sizeable minority of occasional attendees, and in an era when many clergy (including most of those whose parishes were included in this survey) have been in their benefices for less than a decade, is a tribute to the pastoral dedication, hard work and skills of priests. But what we have found also makes the case for well-developed patterns of delivering pastoral care in parishes, drawing on the friendship and local community networks that embrace frequent churchgoers and their less regular counterparts, in order to build on those occasional churchgoers who already report that, *'there are people here who help me cope'* and the roughly one in three who say somebody from the church visits them at home. Much of what might be called pastoral care is delivered informally; it needs no wider authorisation and might actually suffer if it was seen to have been professionalised rather than drawing on naturally occurring links and networks. I would want to suggest, however, that from both the perspective we have been coming from and the evidence we have seen, there is considerable value in having a particular identifiable individual by whom parishioners in a specific community can feel known as part of their belonging to the church.

In terms of such formal ministries, in one or two areas the Church of England has experimented with the reintroduction of a permanent and distinctive diaconate. This has the advantage that it is an ordained ministry, and hence the person carrying it out is more easily recognised and their role understood. It may be time to assess the impact of this development to see if it could be extended more widely. Other places have, with less theological baggage, introduced the concept of ‘focal ministers’, who may be ordained or lay, but have a particular role of being the visible human ambassador for the church in a specific community. Whatever particular model may be followed, I would argue that the important thing is that any person chosen is one whose natural inclination is to be, and probably already is, well embedded in the networks, groups and community life of the area; somebody like my former churchwarden Mavis, to whom I introduced you much earlier.

Informal pastoral ministry already happens. What we’ve discovered is that with their strong sense of belonging through people, and their links within the local community, it may be some of our occasional churchgoers who are in a position to deliver it. Are they already, or can they be encouraged to become, agents of pastoral care and loving service in the community themselves? Is there scope for churches to set up schemes for pastoral care that allow participation by both regular and occasional churchgoers? Is there also a role for the church in supporting and encouraging greater levels of informal support within the community, for example by providing training? Perhaps occasional churchgoers are not just to be viewed as recipients of ‘mission’ but as partners in delivering it, alongside those who come to church often. Let’s see if that approach can be extended to some of the other Marks.

Engaging with society and world

The Anglican *Five Marks of Mission* include the two specific commitments: ‘to seek to transform unjust structures of society’ and ‘to strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and to sustain the life of the earth’. These are wide-reaching aspirations. They don’t lie within the

capacity of churches or individuals to pursue on their own, nor would it be desirable for them to try to do so. Rather, they call the church and its congregation members to work in partnership with other favorably disposed individuals and organisations.

At the local level, churches are to be found at the heart of social projects, fundraising efforts and ethical campaigns. They promote fair-trade produce, run clubs and activities for young families and older inhabitants, hold charity coffee mornings, make contributions to the secular planning process and organise door-to-door collections. The presence of occasional churchgoers at services such as Harvest, and their reported social links with others in the congregation, together provide natural opportunities for us to seek to include them in church-based or church-managed social, environmental and ethical concerns.

Individual church members themselves are often at the heart of non-church-based charities and other organisations that are working to achieve ethical and social goals; everything from the Women's Institute, local cricket club and school governors to the village hall management committee. We've seen that frequent churchgoers are very likely to be involved with these wider local community groups and to enjoy their involvement with them. Their networks of relationships are such that they meet in church with those with whom they also come into contact in other community activities.

Their preference for and enjoyment of belonging through a commitment to taking part in regular activities assists frequent churchgoers to provide the infrastructure that is needed to sustain local organisations and institutions. They are the natural officers and members of committees, the people most likely to commit to a planning group for an event, especially if it will require a regular meeting.

What their effort and commitment does is to allow others, not least our group of occasional churchgoers, who are more predisposed to one-off engagement or require a strong lead from other people, to

make their own contribution as agents of this mission work. Our survey results suggest that there will be particular value in churches looking for mission actions under these two Marks of Mission that are event- or relationship-based, or linked explicitly to place. That way they will maximise the range of those who will want to take part.

What might this look like in practice?

Somebody who is drawn to belong through events and people may well be happy to host a one-off coffee morning, especially if somebody else helps with the planning and the baking. An individual with a strong connection to the place may be willing to play an important part in a campaign to improve the local environment, or help provide food for a project feeding poor children during the school summer holidays. Those who like events should be natural invitees to contribute to a Christmas fair, take part in the annual Christian Aid door-to-door collection, or come along on a protest demonstration that forms part of a wider church campaign against injustice.

Evangelism and nurture

Following the examples we've seen above, we now need to explore the extent to which occasional churchgoers, along with more regular ones, can be both recipients of and partners in the work of the church in evangelism and nurture. Within the *Five Marks of Mission* these two elements are expressed as, 'to proclaim the good news of the kingdom' and, 'to teach, baptise and nurture new believers'.

The strength of friendship links found in the Harvest survey establishes the value of personal relationships as a key component of proclaiming the gospel and nurturing believers. Many churches work with the grain of this, basing their mission strategies on the tenet that friendship is the most common route to joining a church. Where courses such as Alpha and Emmaus are used, it may be advisable to encourage attendance

through friendship or family links rather than through general advertisement. Indeed, when I used Alpha courses for several years as a vicar, the most notable success was in bringing into regular church membership and deeper faith a group of younger dads whose wives and partners were already committed and involved. Fortunately there were enough of them to form their own peer group where friendships were built and sustained.

In addition, the value put on place, and in particular the association of place with family, suggests that careful thought as to how buildings are presented and interpreted will also have a significant role to play in both gospel proclamation and nurturing of occasional churchgoers. Congregations that are forever giving out the message that their building is a millstone around their necks are unlikely to be heard positively by those who have strong connections to it. However, I have known apparently non-evangelistic engagements, such as involving occasional churchgoers in buildings projects, become an effective tool for outreach.

It is important, whilst we are discussing evangelism and nurture, that we remember that the model underlying this book cautions against a simple equation of successful proclamation and nurture with increased attendance at weekly services or membership of church groups. For some that will undoubtedly be the case—a predisposition to event-based belonging does not preclude becoming committed to activities—but for many, the outcome of successful work on these two Marks of Mission will be a group of occasional churchgoers who have a better understanding of and commitment to their faith, which they act out through diverse and often one-off engagements in and beyond the local community, who access the church for pastoral support, feel connected to its public leadership and are willing to support it financially on a more frequent and more generous, if episodic, basis.

It is also important to note that the occasional churchgoers, whose faith is supported by relationships, places and events rather than activities, have something here to teach frequent attendees about the

importance of diversity in how Christian faith is lived out and expressed. Part of the process of growing in Christian maturity is an increasing recognition of the faith of others; the proclamation of this gospel truth by our occasional group to their frequent churchgoing counterparts is mission in its full sense.

What can we conclude?

The evidence we've found of a rich and complex pattern of belonging challenges the often implicit assumption that occasional churchgoers are 'nominal' Christians, a premise which underpins much current writing and thinking on mission. In its place we have established the notion that these are Christians who express their belonging to God and Christ in different and less easily numerically assessed ways from the present dominant model of regular Sunday worship and involvement in church groups and committees.

Taking part alongside regular churchgoers in the performance of the *Five Marks of Mission* in the ways we've described represents a significant level of commitment, a real belonging to the local church and a genuine participation in the task of Christian discipleship on the part of occasional churchgoers. Putting the opportunities for such at the heart of the life of the local church is not a means of inoculating individuals against a proper personal commitment to Christ, but rather recognises that for some people such commitment is expressed differently. If occasional churchgoers understand, express and live out their faith in a less articulate fashion than frequent churchgoers, this may be more to do with the systemic failure of churches to engage seriously with them on their own territory, rather than indicative of a lesser commitment to what they consider it is to be Christian.

Those who come to the rural Harvest service and other occasional church events, including through a regular pattern of attendance at baptisms, marriages and funerals in the parish, are amenable to living out the *Five Marks of Mission* of the Anglican Communion. Drawing them

in to such a programme of involvement may help demonstrate a model of church that is not simply one where the professional religious are the agents and the laity are reduced to being recipients or consumers of religion. Indeed, it may be the fact that churchgoing is seen as a largely passive activity that deters some from attending more frequently.

Finally, I'm increasingly convinced that when the local church pays proper attention to the ways in which people belong, that will help some individuals to move through areas of engagement to which they find it easier to commit towards a wider involvement in the life of the local church, including more frequent participation in its regular worship.

Questions

- Do the *Five Marks of Mission* set a good agenda for the local church to follow? Is there anything missing from them?
- Can I think of examples of where people have come to a deeper faith through engaging in a practical piece of action in the community?
- When we are organising things in our church, could we look wider at who might be involved in them?
- Has my own faith grown through engaging in mission? If so, what made the difference?



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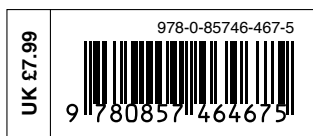
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God's Belongers should transform our thinking about what it means to belong to church. Uniquely, David Walker replaces the old and worn division between 'members' and 'non-members' with a fourfold model of belonging: through relationship, through place, through events, and through activities. From his extensive practical research, the author shows how 'belonging' can encompass a far wider group of people than those who attend weekly services. This opens up creative opportunities for mission in today's world.

David Walker served in churches in the diocese of Sheffield before becoming Bishop of Dudley in 2000 and then, in 2013, Bishop of Manchester. He is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts, a member of the Rural Theology Association and the Church of England Ministry Council, and one of the Church Commissioners for England. In 2014 he was awarded a PhD from the University of Warwick for the studies on which this book is based.

'In this excellent book David Walker brings together his considerable gifts as a first-rate mathematician and theologian in a highly accessible manner. The result is not only fascinating and thought-provoking: its insights have the potential significantly to renew the mission of the church in its efforts to make the love of God in Jesus known. I hope it will be very widely read.'

The Right Revd Dr John Inge, Bishop of Worcester



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