

Xpressions Café—Looking Forward

Part Three: Practice

In the first paper in this series I suggested that the 'target audience' for Xpressions Café is made up of unchurched and dechurched people: those who have had little or no contact with church. They are mostly people who are increasingly steeped in postmodern culture and I argued that we need to operate the Café in ways which will connect with them and will fit with their culture.

That paper was concerned with the foundations of Xpressions Café; the second looked at some aspects of discipling the people who come to the Café; here I want to both to invite us to challenge our existing practice and to suggest some extra things which we could consider doing. What follows is not intended to be definitive but rather to provoke thought and debate.-

Basic Assumptions

At a recent Café we sang "We have a gospel to proclaim" and "Here I am, wholly available" in two different sessions. At another the experienced leader was talking about difficult life situations and said, "without our faith we couldn't go on." But could a non-Christian sing either of the songs with integrity or even understanding? How would a non-Christian relate to the phrase, "our faith"?

It is very easy to slip into church speak and to make assumptions about those present. Yet if we are to reach out to the unchurched we must be careful. This is not to limit our testimony or our worship of God but simply states the need to be clear. For a leader to speak of his or her own faith is fine as long as there isn't an assumption that this faith is shared by everyone present. It is fine to sing a worship song (though see below) but invite people to join in if they can, don't assume that they will be able to.

Yes, there will be Christians present, and they may well make up the majority of those present, but if our focus is non-Christians we must always be sensitive to their position. Otherwise we may well make them feel excluded, 'outside the club', and they may not return.

Multimedia

This is a multimedia world. People are used to receiving news and entertainment through the screen of a device such as TV, cinema, computer, games console or mobile phone.

Because of this video and other multimedia experiences should be a normal part of Xpressions Café. Some Xplore leaders are already good at using video; others are not yet 'tuned in' to it. This is not so much a technical issue—I am always available to help on this front if necessary—but more a matter of becoming used to thinking in visual terms when devising a session. There are a lot of links to suitable material on my website (www.emerging.church.org); these can be used directly or as a trigger for finding new stuff.

Xpressions, in particular, could consider how to make better use of modern electronic media. There is a lot of video suitable for children and families. Some of it is specifically Christian (though a lot of this is heavy-handed and too 'American evangelical' to be of any use in a Café context) but there is a lot of secular video which makes a good point and can engage with children.

There are also Christian computer games, though I am not aware of their quality or suitability. It might be worth investigating whether we could provide a couple of consoles for a period of time during a Café with suitable games available. This could help some of

the older children to stay engaged with Café but practicalities (where would we site them, for instance) might make this not worth pursuing.

Multimedia doesn't just mean video, it has two key components: a focus on the visual and an emphasis on more than one sensory channel being used. So PowerPoint images to accompany a talk, giving out images for people to meditate on while playing some music, using prayer stations which engage the senses and similar approaches are all part of engaging with a multimedia world. We do much of this very well already; we need to continue.

Music

I said above that it is fine to invite people to sing a worship song. But we need to remember that Christian music is for Christians; perhaps we should be using more secular music and less Christian music. There is a lot of secular popular music which we could and should be using in church, just as Paul quoted approvingly from pagan poets when he preached at Athens.

We should also consider carefully how much we sing. Congregational singing is alien to many of our target audience; it puts them way out of their comfort zone. We should not stop it altogether but perhaps the default position should be that we play secular music (live or recorded) for people to listen to or as accompaniment to video or activities.

Interestingly, 'sacred' music such as plainsong, early polyphony or pieces by modern composers such as Tavener, Pärt or Górecki is much more acceptable than hymns or choruses. This is because the former are seen as 'spiritual' (and therefore 'good') while hymns and choruses are 'religious' (and therefore 'bad').

Healing and Wholeness

Contemporary secular culture has an abiding concern with health. Diets, health clubs and alternative therapies abound. Experience has shown that unchurched people will respond positively to offers of healing and prayer. Even if they do not take up the offer themselves they are usually grateful that the offer is there.

I there propose that every café should include a time when prayer for healing is offered. This could be offered in the 'quiet time' between Xplore sessions. It should last for no more than ten minutes. In Chedgrave it might be possible to designate an area at the back of the North Aisle as a prayer area, perhaps curtained off in some way to provide a modicum of privacy and a sense of place. This could be used during the 'quiet times' between sessions as well as for the times set aside for prayer or healing. To avoid any difficult one-to-one situations, I suggest that there should be two people to pray for anyone who comes.

I also propose that we also offer a brief time of prayer ministry at every Café. Again, it should be no more than ten minutes and would also be offered in a gap between Xplore sessions. People would be invited to bring any items for prayer, either sharing them verbally or writing them down and bringing them to be prayed for.

We would note these sessions on the Xpresso menus. It would also be a good idea to have some explanatory leaflets available in Xpresso which explained a little about prayer and healing and clarified how people could make use of these services.

'Preaching'

I don't like this sermon thing, because it's just one person's way of interpreting whatever he read. It's not a group discussion here you know, and it's just him telling you. (Quoted in Spencer 2003)

We should minimise anything which feels like traditional preaching from the front. Sometimes a bit of explanation or straightforward teaching is necessary, but this should always be brief. In past sessions I have used a guideline of a maximum of three minutes chat from any one person before a change of voice or a new activity. An exception to this would be if we instituted ten-minute taster sessions as outlined in paper two.

However, this does not mean that we cannot preach in Xpressions Café; it just means that preaching must be appropriate to our potential audience. In my course I suggest that postmodern preaching must rely on three things: story, testimony, and performance (Seel 2008). There is no space to go into these here but if these principles are followed we should be able to preach the gospel in a way which will engage with the unchurched.

Mystery

My head tells me there isn't a God but my heart wants to believe it. (Quoted in Spencer 2003)

We should pay more attention to helping people engage with a sense of mystery. We do this quite well: we ask questions rather than offer answers; we share stories; we invite active participation in prayer stations; we offer guided meditations and, of course, we now have Xperience at Loddon. How could we do more of this? What else could we do? One suggestion has been relaxation sessions: "Periods of quiet and relaxing the body could provide an opportunity to contemplate images that might further understanding, a sense of awe, a sense of well-being / healing, etc." Are there others?

Tactile Participation

Xplore offers a lot of participation already, engaging the mind on discussion and some of the senses with video, music, prayer stations, etc. However, I think that it could learn from Xpressions and offer more hands-on craft activities. By the same token, I wonder if the balance in Xpressions is sometimes tilted too much towards craft and tactile activity. Are there others modes of involvement which might be suitable?

Agnostics Anonymous

You know, it's the arrogance, um it's a very well dressed up humble looking arrogance, but it's arrogance nonetheless however, you know. That's what annoys me. Um, you know, you're not with us, therefore you're against us. No I'm with you, but I'm not sure, I'm not against you, and I just want to know, you know. If you know, how do you know? Do you really know, all the time? (Quoted in Hay & Hunt 2000)

The sermon might be out of favour but people do have questions and they do want to learn. Could we offer a regular discussion slot with a provocative topic? This would have an underlying principle of 'no question is stupid, no comment is unacceptable' and would be a safe place for anyone to come and engage. This would be different from the taster sessions, which would essentially be bite-sized chunks of teaching, but the Agnostics Anonymous might well be tied to the taster session topic.

I have two questions about this idea. Firstly, would anyone come? Secondly, do we have the skills to run such a session without becoming preachy, or displaying what comes across as an arrogant sense of certainty and superiority.

Implications

Most of the ideas put forward above apply more to Xplore than to Xpressions. Xplore seems the natural setting in which to engaged with the unchurched. Yet the largest group

of Café visitors never engages with Xplore. They tend to be either upstairs in Xpresso with their children or in Xpresso relaxing while their children are upstairs. There are, therefore, two challenges facing us.

Firstly, Xpressions' avowed aim is to cater for families: parents and children together. I wonder if it is possible to engage both adults and children in a way which is sufficient for both. It is my belief that if Xpressions café is to become more mature we will have to engage with the adults in a different way than is currently done in Xpressions. It seems to me that Xplore is the natural place to do that. This will mean that we will expect there to be times when children are in Xpressions unaccompanied by their parents. I know that this actually happens already but making this explicit may be hard for the Xpressions team as it seems to contravene one of their fundamental values.

The second challenge will be to encourage Xpressions parents to come to Xplore. How could we provide an easy 'pathway' to encourage them to take the next steps? We need to offer sessions which are attractive and which deliver something which will encourage them to come back. One suggestion is that we give out written invitations to key Xplore sessions as people come into Xpressions. There is much work to be done here in helping to find a good balance between Xplore and Xpressions so that we may engage parents and children in the good news of God's kingdom.

In Conclusion

In these three papers I have tried to set out the state of Xpressions Café as I currently understand it and to suggest some ways forward. Some of the suggestions may bear fruit, others will come to nothing. Some will inspire new thinking, well beyond anything envisaged here. I hope that they will clarify some issues and inspire creative debate about others.

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